

A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES  
OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE HIGH SCHOOL SOPHOMORES  
WHO ARE STRUGGLING READERS

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of African American male high school sophomores in the metro-Atlanta area who are struggling readers. The study encompassed investigation of the self-efficacy, future outlook, and how past and present reading experiences impact African American adolescent males' ability to be hopeful and optimistic in their future career paths and postsecondary options. Participants comprised 12 African American high school sophomores enrolled in a Title I school found in the metro-Atlanta, Georgia area. The study was guided by one central research question and two research subquestions. In general, the research questions were used to discover how lived experiences contribute to the attitudes of 10th grade African American adolescent males who struggle in the area of reading. Data were collected through individual interviews, a focus group interview, and reflective journaling. All data collected were coded to find common themes related to the research questions. The results of the study offer insight into the lived experiences of adolescent African American males and their attitudes toward reading. Further research may support current findings and initiate the creation of a more relevant, diverse curriculum that impacts a larger population.

*Keywords:* adolescence, African American males, high school reading, struggling readers, postsecondary

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### **Dedication**

First and foremost, this manuscript is dedicated to our Heavenly Father who did not allow me to lose myself despite seemingly impossible circumstances and situations encountered during this long and very difficult journey. I dedicate this to my students, co-workers and friends, and parents. Without the students, I would have never started this research. And without my co-workers and friends, I would have never completed this research. And finally, I also dedicate the completion of this project to my mom and dad who transitioned during this process and were not able to witness the fruition of the hard work and sacrifices of time and energy committed to this process.

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### **List of Abbreviations**

Advanced Placement (AP)

Black Scholars High School (BSHS)

Georgia Department of Education (GADOE)

Individualized Education Plan (IEP)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Language, Speech, and Hearing Services of Schools (LSHSS)

Nation's Report Card (NRC)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT)

Socioeconomic Status (SES)

Standard American English (SAE)

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Overview

Chapter One of this study includes an introduction to the research beginning with the historical, social, and theoretical background of the study problem. The philosophical assumptions and research paradigm of the study are explained and the problem and purpose statements are stated formally. Finally, the significance of the study is described, the research questions explicated, and relevant terms defined. The chapter concludes with a brief summary.

### Background

#### Historical Context

Historically, the voices of African American males have been heard mainly in attempts to mark the stages of their lives and to defend their self-image or identity in incidents of racial conflict or challenges against manhood and humanity during time periods when the status of African Americans, in general, was considered inferior (Davis, 2005; Magnis, 1999). As it relates to the historical significance of the present study, the image of the African American male in both texts and society has largely been seen as negative (Morgan, 2011; Morris, 2011; Reems, 2008; Rollins, 2016). Canonized texts or literature consistently used in the public school curriculum, such as *Tom Sawyer*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *Othello*, often present African American males in compromising or dehumanizing scenarios from which they eventually free themselves and become an exemplar of triumph, or succumb to societal pressure and become tragic heroes. While these stories are meant to demonstrate perseverance and triumph, they can have an adverse impact on African American male students and reinforce stereotypes of their inferiority (Block, Koch, Liberman, Merriweather, & Roberson, 2011; Johnson, 2012; Steele, 2012). Asante (1992) argued for the necessity of incorporating a more African-centered

curriculum to reflect the true melting pot that America contends to be; however, the images of African Americans in texts reflect those in submissive and degrading roles. While African American adolescent females have seemingly found refuge in contemporary pop-fiction genres that explore the concept of complex relationships and traditionally forbidden topics (Bell Kaplan & Cole, 2003), African American males have a limited number of storylines available to which they can relate or escape. Reforms in media center or library expectations allow librarians to order materials that reflect the demographics of the community, which increased the availability of high-interest texts in some areas; however, unilateral implementation is not yet evident (Lewis, Simon, Uzzell, Horwitz, & Casserly, 2010). Additionally, many teachers have contributed to African American students' reading deficiencies by unintentionally harboring internal biases toward students and having lower expectations for them in reading as well as in the classroom (Uhlenberg & Brown, 2002). As a direct result, these students may respond accordingly by failing to actively participate in, or becoming disengaged from, the learning process (Irvine & McAllister, 2002; Kunjufu, 2012).

In years past, students have been presented with texts that were not aligned with their reading engagement and reading achievement levels simply because the texts in the traditional school curriculum do not meet their social and cultural needs (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Additionally, African American males' suspension rates are significantly higher than the suspension rates of other ethnic groups (Bailey, 1998; Kunjufu, 1986). Subsequently, the missed school time adversely impacts African American males' academic achievement as it cannot be recovered and puts male students at an academic disadvantage from their peers (Mendez & Knoff, 2003).



## **Social Context**

According to the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce (National Center on Education Statistics [NCES], 2006), core subjects such as math, science, history, literature, and the arts all require high preparation levels in the way of reading, writing, and speaking and provide a valuable foundation for soft skills required in the contemporary workforce. The National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges purported that "writing needs to be at the forefront of current efforts to improve schools and the quality of education" (MacArthur, Graham, & Fitzgerald, 2006, p. 7). Yet, approximately 70% of students in Grades 4–12 are identified as low-performing readers and writers (J. Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007). The elementary school years provide the foundation for both middle and high school curricula; therefore, the inability to retain foundational information has lasting implications as to how the student may be affected in years to come. Reading and writing provides a gateway for individuals to become independent and self-sufficient in society, and higher paying job opportunities are available to those who are educated as opposed to those who are not (Chaffee, 2014; Holzer, 2017; Ischinger, 2007; Scott, 2014). A failure to acknowledge and address the reading deficiencies and struggles at any stage adversely affects both families and communities.

The U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor and Statistics (2016) reported the unemployment rate of someone with a bachelor's degree at 2.8%; however, individuals with only a high school diploma reflect a higher unemployment rate of 5.4%. The unemployment rate for those with less than a high school diploma is almost doubled at 8.0%. Also, the Nation's Report Card (NRC, 2015) reported that only 17% of African American students scored at or above proficient in the area of reading, compared to 25% for Hispanics, 46% for Caucasians, and 49% for Asians (NRC, 2015). The literacy literature also revealed Hispanic students were trending

upward in reading proficiency levels despite language barriers, while African American students continued to underperform in the area of reading (NRC, 2015). Little information has been offered to justify the reason for these trends between racial groups, but it is increasingly apparent how important the overall role of literacy is to America. Consequently, increasing literacy rates leads to better socioeconomic and sociocultural futures for African American households.

### **Theoretical Context**

African American adolescent males are also faced with social barriers existing outside the school environment that adversely impact their academic success in reading and writing (Kotok, 2017; Riley, 2015; Webb, 2016). Taking steps to eliminate literacy-rooted educational barriers may contribute to a better quality of life for not only for African American adolescent males, but also for African American communities as a whole by strengthening African American males' feelings of self-efficacy, which could lead to the reconstruction of the broken family unit that characterizes African American culture. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2013), African American homes are frequently led by single women, and single-parent homes are directly tied to socioeconomic status. In many cases, single-parent households led by a parent with a low level of education live at or below the poverty line, which creates social and economic barriers for children as well adults.

In addition to financial struggles, African American adolescent males must also cope with unique social expectations from their peers. These expectations include proving one's self-worth to others and sometimes considering themselves as the predominant male figure in the home can to lead to situations such as fights, crime, and dropping out of school, all of which contribute to the lack of desire to succeed academically (Kearney & Levine, 2016; Loveless, 2017; Simons et al., 2016; Webb, 2016). Consequently, African American students are over-

represented in special education classes and have higher-than-average suspension rates (Bailey, 2017; Blitzman, 2015; Loveless, 2017). All of these factors combined result in many missed lessons, social discomfort, and the low self-esteem of African American males (Johnson, 2016; Savina & Wan, 2017; Webb, 2016). Reading has also been considered a method of proverbial escape and an outlet to minimize daily frustrations and obstacles; and adolescents, in general, sometimes need escapism (Jack, 2013; Lehman, 2001). Understanding the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that motivate and promote reading success for this population of students may help them to contribute positively to society, in addition to driving the purpose of and necessity for the present study.

### **Situation of Self**

I have worked as an English teacher in urban public education for more than 18 years. Throughout these years, I have been troubled by African American male students who appear to be the most reluctant readers and who consistently perform poorly on both school-based and state-wide assessments. Thus, I have often wondered about the point at which these students become disengaged from academics and their lack of interest begins.

In addition to being an educator working in a Title I, predominately African American metropolitan city school, the philosophical assumption which best fit my research is the epistemological approach. Unlike other assumptions, the knowledge gained from the lived experiences of the African American adolescent male participants is relevant to both my professional career and my personal life. With the exception of a 3-year teaching period in an upper class socioeconomic status (SES) school, all of my 19 years of teaching experience have been spent in Title I schools with a predominantly African American student population. Knowing this, I refrained from adding my own bias based on not only my teaching experience,

but also my personal experiences as an African American female who is a product of the public school system.

As ethnic minorities, African American students' voices are sometimes not heard; however, it was my goal to allow these participants an opportunity to learn from their feelings and perspectives. By conducting this study, I was able to explore some of the factors that inhibit the academic success of African American male students.

Finally, the social constructivism paradigm used to guide this transcendental phenomenological study was most appropriate because it allows individuals to "seek understanding of the world in which they live and work" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 26). In satisfying the expectation of social constructivism, open-ended questions based on reading experiences will result in a more accurate interpretation of motives and the experiences that have helped shape attitudes toward reading.

### **Problem Statement**

African American male students continue to fall behind other racial groups in the area of reading achievement and have continuously done so for the past 50 years (Blackford & Khojasteh, 2013; Chambers, 2009; Chambers, Huggins, Locke, & Fowler, 2014; Ford & Moore, 2013; Hanushek, 2016; Kellow & Jones, 2008). The disparities that exist between the African American adolescent male students' reading achievement levels and the reading achievement levels of students of other ethnicities is a significant problem. African American male students lag behind both Caucasian students and Asian groups in most academic areas, particularly reading (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Carter, 2005; Cohen & Bhatt, 2012; Jencks & Phillips, 1998). Another problem addressed in this study, following deficiencies in reading, is the limited number of studies detailing the self-described lived experiences of African American male students who

are struggling readers. Although recent research has been focused on the overall school experience of African American male students as a whole, there is little literature regarding the personal experiences of African American male students and their struggles to read. African American male students' voices will help fill a gap in the literature and provide valuable understanding of how African American male students' overall self-efficacy, self-perception, and difficulties with reading impact their overall academic outlook and shape their postsecondary goals and aspirations. Therefore, the problem addressed in this study was the lack of voice offered to 10th grade African American males in describing their lived experiences as struggling readers in the metro-Atlanta area. In offering them a voice, insight can be gained and potentially help close achievement gaps present across ethnicities in the area of reading, as well as other subjects.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of 10th-grade African American male students who are struggling readers in the metro-Atlanta area. In this study, a struggling reader was defined as a student whose reading ability is at least 2 years below grade level (Hall, 2009; Hipp, 2008; Peterson, 2011). The major theory used to guide this study was the critical race theory, as it emphasizes "studying and transforming the relationship between race, racism, and power" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 3). Race, racism, and power are factors contributing to social stereotypes and attitudes toward minorities. Although the study was also grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory, the critical race theory goes beyond the social context of a situation and addresses how race contributes to the phenomenon. Due to the specific nature of race and its relationship to this

study, both theories were appropriate as a means to gain valuable and substantive insight regarding African American male students who are struggling readers.

### **Significance of the Study**

Understanding reading deficiency as it differs from one ethnic group to another could drastically impact a group's educational attainment, feelings of self-efficacy, employability and employment opportunities, and contributions to society as a whole (Burbridge, 1991; Carter, 2005; Hunter & Bartee, 2003; Neuman & Celano, 2001). Although this study was situated within the field of education, the findings could contribute to much broader conversations and disciplines, such as issues of race relations and economics in the United States (Murphy, 2009; Neuman & Celano, 2001; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2006; Taliaferro & Decuir-Gunby, 2008). A. W. Tatum (2015) noted that social and economic deterioration creates a more strenuous lifestyle for African American males and makes it less likely for them to earn high academic and societal outcomes. Arrington, Hall, and Stevenson (2003) also discuss how understanding literacy issues and appropriately addressing them could lower instances of racial and ethnic isolation and living in high-risk communities.

A. W. Tatum (2015) acknowledged that current classroom textbooks and supplemental reading selections fail to include or meet the needs of the African American male students, resulting in these texts being meaningless to African American male students. A. W. Tatum further identified two characteristics of text: hard knowledge and soft knowledge. Hard-knowledge texts are focused on higher order thinking while soft-knowledge readings, found to be more interesting, offer more relevant experiences to teens (A. W. Tatum, 2015). The present study may provide more insight into classroom texts and reading materials that meet the needs of

some students, while the experiences of some of the more diverse student populations (e.g., African American males) may be ignored and potentially create adverse effects in the classroom.

The practical significance of the study is related to its metropolitan location, relevance to public education, and the targeted population. The metropolitan area in which the study sample resides is known for its high numbers of African American communities and the numerous opportunities available for African Americans seeking to increase their chances for career success. Approximately 42% of the students in the entire district are African American, and the targeted high school researched has an African American population of 66%, with 45% of the population labeled as economically disadvantaged (“Schoolgrades”, 2015). Additionally, the state of Georgia ranks 45th in education based on average Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores, and graduation rates in the state continue to fall below the state average of 66% (Heeter, 2013). On a broader scale, research on inner-city school populations and reluctant learners within these types of populations could have a positive impact on teaching and learning in other urban areas.

Further underscoring the need for the present study is the lack of literature related directly to adolescent African American males. Husband (2012) noted the lack of documentation available for males in early childhood and early elementary contexts while suggesting changes to address the achievement gap of teens. McKenna, Kear, and Ellsworth (1995) discussed the loss of interest in reading for African American boys as early the fourth grade, noting that their attitudes toward academic and recreational learning become increasingly negative. In the current study, the focus was on content-related reading struggles, potential issues with teachers, and feelings of inadequacy in self-efficacy caused by societal factors. In addition, the study served as an attempt to understand how the school learning environment and the home life of the

participants affect self-expectations and feelings of self-efficacy. Finally, results of the study may lend insight as to whether reading struggles stem from external factors beyond the school's control.

This study was centered on the importance of reading fluency as it contributes to African American males improving their positions in society. In addition, this study was designed to offer insight that may directly impact the future of the participants. Having a better understanding of the factors contributing to African American males being deficient in reading ability could lead to improved reading comprehension, writing, and math skills, which could have a lasting impact on the lives of African American adolescent males as well as far-reaching social benefits.

### **Research Questions**

This transcendental phenomenological study of the lived experiences of 10th grade African American males who are struggling readers will be guided by one central research question and two research subquestions.

#### **Central Research Question**

What are the lived experiences of 10th-grade African American male students who are struggling readers in the metro-Atlanta area?

Qualitative information created by observing and interacting with participants is required to better understand their beliefs, attitudes, and feelings (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). The central research question of this study was appropriate because it served to provide understanding of how life experiences and events contribute to the overall attitude and feelings of 10th-grade African American male students toward reading. It was also important to understand why African American male students are not motivated to read books and materials, other than



school-related and assigned texts, that could also foster increased interest in reading. Palani (2012) stated that “reading is the most important avenue of effective learning and the achievement of academic success requires successful reading” (p. 91). This central research question represents an effort to understand the participants’ experiences with reading.

### **Subquestion 1 (SQ1)**

SQ1: How do 10th-grade African American male students who are struggling readers describe their attitudes toward reading?

The intent behind the first subquestion was to identify what participants consider to be the root cause(s) of their lack of reading enjoyment by investigating their attitudes toward reading in general. Scholars have noted that the fourth grade of elementary school is a pivotal time for developing long-term reading engagement in students, and those who do not develop as readers have been identified in the literature as victims of the fourth-grade failure syndrome (Graham, 1994; Jefferson, 2007; Kirk, 2001; Kunjufu, 2007;). The extent to which social groups and family structure impacts a student’s desire to read will be addressed by Subquestion 1. According to Whiting (2009), the family and social structure are highly influential to education.

### **Subquestion 2 (SQ2)**

SQ2: How do 10th-grade African American male students who are struggling readers perceive that reading challenges impact their views of self?

Self-efficacy was explored with Subquestion 2 by seeking understanding of the students’ views of self. Self-efficacy was relevant in this study because how one views oneself greatly impacts how he or she will interact with society and respond to adversity (Shunk, 1991; Young-Ju, Bong, & Choi, 2000). According to Cramm, Strating, Roebroek, and Nieboer (2013), “People with high self-efficacy choose to perform more challenging tasks; they set themselves

higher goals and stick to them” (p. 554). Students who struggle may see themselves in a negative light that could impact their resiliency in overcoming reading obstacles and handling social issues as well. Subquestion 2 was used to learn how student difficulties with reading shape how students view themselves.

### **Definitions of Terms**

1. *Hard knowledge*: The term *hard knowledge* refers to the students’ cognitive orientations and dispositions anchored in academic domains (A. W. Tatum, 2015).
2. *Lexile reading score*: The Lexile reading score is the unit of measurement used when determining the difficulty of a text and the reading level of readers (MetaMetrics Inc., 2018).
3. *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)*: The NCLB is the version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 created by President George W. Bush, which significantly increased the federal role in holding schools responsible for the academic progress of all students. This legislation was focused on ensuring that states and schools boost the performance of certain groups of students (e.g., English language learners, students in special education, poor and minority children) whose achievement, on average, trails their peers (NCLB, 2002).
4. *Soft knowledge*: Soft knowledge refers to the students’ socioemotional orientations and dispositions (B. L. Tatum, 1999).
5. *Struggling reader*: A struggling reader is a student who typically reads 2 or more years below his or her current grade level but does not have an identified learning disability (Hall, 2014).

## **Summary**

The purpose of the study was to understand the lived experiences of African American male high school sophomores in the metro-Atlanta area who are struggling readers. While Chapter One included an introduction to the study, Chapter Two encompasses a review of selected studies and theories that aid in the understanding of disengaged reading practices and lower reading levels of African American adolescent males.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Overview

Chapter Two includes a review of selected studies and theories that aid in the understanding of disengaged reading practices and lower reading levels of African American adolescent males. A myriad of situations and circumstances make the delivery of a quality public education in America difficult, and some of the discrepancies of education as it relates to the group of interest can be placed into several categories. In addition, cultural diversity, SES, child-rearing practices, and societal expectations may all have either positive or negative influences on educational outcomes and the quality of life a person enjoys (Ippolito, Steele, & Samson, 2008). The inability to read and comprehend material is a major hindrance to success that can impact one's success in the job market and thus affect the person's quality of life. According to McCallum et al. (2011), the success of ethnic minority students is a highly researched and analyzed problem with seemingly no concrete resolution or remedy.

The achievement gap that exists between different ethnic groups in the United States, particularly the gap separating adolescent African American males from other groups, continues to grow (Raskind, 1998). This widening gap may be related to African American males' interest in being accepted by his peers, issues with self-perception and identity, and socioeconomic issues. While some of these contributing factors appear to be obvious, researchers continue to search for more direct reasons to explain this widening gap. While presenting some of the most recent information regarding these issues, the interaction between and behavior of the minority group of interest in this study as these things ultimately affects their potential to succeed academically is also discussed.

## Theoretical Framework

There are several theories that combine to create a foundation for a study combining academic achievement, social influence, and the human experience to explain specific human behavior. Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory is directly applicable to the exploration of adolescent African American males' reading deficiencies. According to Vygotsky, social foundations and interactions are fundamental to human development. Adolescents, in particular, are driven by social relationships. Operant conditioning theory (Skinner, 1953) is also relevant to this study as it suggests that behavior is driven by reward and punishment. Children respond to stimuli in their surroundings, and this can adversely affect their academic, social, and emotional development. The group of interest in this study regularly faces negative stereotypical attitudes and cultural labeling that could have lasting, adverse effects on their overall behavioral health and self-perception.

Although J. B. Watson (1925) and later, Ivan Pavlov, explored human behavior, the human psyche, and the conscious mind, B. F. Skinner is most closely associated with the behaviorism theory and provided the foundation in the study of human behavior. According to Drasgow (2010), the psychologist professionally known as B. F. Skinner dedicated most of his work to understanding human behavior, and he is well-respected in this field despite having had a seemingly unrelated undergraduate degree in English.

Behaviorism itself addresses the situations and circumstances that create and contribute to human reactions to a variety of stimuli. A considerable amount of Skinner's (1953) research on classroom-related behaviors was explored within what he referred to as operant psychology. Skinner (1953) discussed his study of human behavior using a three-way contingency consisting of an antecedent stimulus, a behavior, and a consequence which, when combined, create the

motivation for learning (Drasgow, 2010). African American males, the group of interest in the current study, appear to be highly motivated by their peer groups during their teenage years.

Cooperative learning is among the learning styles that have often proven successful in increasing the academic achievement of African American learners (Boykin et al., 2005). In understanding this, the stimuli in Skinner's (1953) theory becomes the cooperative learning group, which affects behavior and creates a more positive learning outcome. Therefore, this method of reaching pupils should be explored in relation to achievement in schools to test the theory. If grouping proves to be an effective learning strategy, then the focus can shift to learning methods through which they become not only intrinsically motivated, but also act as positive motivational forces between or among each other.

Skinner's (1974) later research addressed the contrasts between determinism and free will. While free will suggests that people are not direct products of their environments and ultimately choose to make good or bad decisions, determinism is the opposite: a person's behavior is in direct response to the elements around him or her. There are countless negative stereotypes, images, and reports about African American males; issues with education are not excluded from these stereotypes. Ware (2014) revealed that in the social media generation, overt racism has been replaced by more passive, unconscious racist behaviors and that these behaviors are more frequent than ever. In this light, it appears that determinism most frequently prevails over free will as African American students continue to struggle in school, generation after generation.

According to Bandura (1986), experiences that form beliefs in one's ability to attain objectives directly impact the quality of outcomes. This suggests the importance of the ways in which embracing strong feelings of self-efficacy contributes to obtaining goals and creating a

positive self-image. Thus, when one is encouraged while in his or her home environment to perform better in work-related tasks, the needs of the individual student are met and achievement gaps begin to close. The constructivism theory is another closely related theory to emotions and environmental factors that affect desired results in students. According to Colburn (2000), its main premise of constructivism is that learners' opinions are forged by their experiences, living environment, and exposure to the world. This concept is intertwined with Bandura's (1986) social learning theory as they both address the ways that an individual's past experiences shape one's thoughts, beliefs, and future.

### **Related Literature**

#### **Reading Skills: Coding and Decoding**

According to Brack (1998) and Shankweiler, Lundquist, Dreyer, and Dickinson (1996), young children who do not comprehend well also have poor word recognition skills and consequently are unable to properly decode words and comprehend their meanings. Arnold (2010) discussed the *whole language* approach to teaching students to read, through which learning is student-centered, the teacher is a facilitator of learning, and reading is an active, social event in which students make word associations with items that interest them. Teaching phonetics is an alternative, and as it relates to whole language learning, an abandoned method in addressing reading and decoding terms. Phonetics is primarily focused on appropriate word pronunciation in attempts to help individuals recognize words and make self-connections to understand or comprehend word meanings in hopes of increasing reading fluency.

However, learning to decode words is an important aspect of learning to read. Many critics (McCandliss, Beck, Sandak, & Perfetti, 2003) consider this the reason that children are unable to decode words using the phonemic construction and deconstruction of a word in later

years of schooling. The inability to properly read and decode word meanings directly impacts an individual's ability to comprehend more complex texts later in life; therefore, at the high-school level, students who may have struggled early on may find themselves sinking further behind their peers if they are unable to grasp how to properly decode and assign meanings to words. This will decrease decoding barriers and may allow students to focus on word meanings and connections instead of linguistics and semantics that impede their ability to progress through a passage or text. Sometimes, the need to simply pronounce words properly and avoid embarrassing situations supersedes the desire to learn a word's meaning or relevance, and this leads to a student's resentment for reading altogether. Reading fluency, defined as the ability to read text quickly, accurately, and with proper expression (Pikulski & Chard, 2005), has been tied to reading comprehension (Y. G. Kim, 2015). When there is an increase in the ability to decode words and identify their meaning, there will be increased levels of reading fluency and, subsequently, fewer challenges faced by students who struggle to understand words.

Reading deficits are also found within adult learner populations, although little research has been dedicated to adults' reading deficits (Bell & Perfetti, 1994; Cunningham, Stanovich, & Wilson, 1990; Ewald-Jackson & Doellinger, 2002). While the interest in adult literacy continues to increase, there still remains a gap in understanding the lack of motivation and interest in reading after high school for those who do not continue on to postsecondary or adult education programs. Therefore, discussions of teaching reading are somewhat nonexistent for students once they leave high school if they do not further their formal education. As previously noted in the literature, high school students are rarely assessed for their reading ability and can easily be promoted even if they are unable to decode words or read fluently and this will impact their



quality of life in later years (Bell & Perfetti, 1994; Cunningham et al., 1990; Ewald-Jackson & Doellinger, 2002). Ginther (1976) discussed the dangers of failing to acknowledge this problem:

Without verification of the explanation of reading failures in Black children, the classroom teacher will be engulfed in a plethora of recommendations and materials for the remediation of reading failures that have no empirical validation of the theoretical assumptions upon which the teaching strategies are based. . . . School systems spend millions of dollars annually on reading remediation programs that are often not adequately implemented or understood, therefore creating a waste of valuable monetary resources. (p. 87)

### **At-Risk Students in Year-Round Versus Traditional School**

While the basic foundation and principles of the traditional school calendar no longer exist, the 180-day school calendar continues to adversely impact learning in all disciplines (Cooper, 2003). Agricultural and farming demands required students to spend time at home helping the family harvest crops during the early 19th century, but the existence of students working to plant and harvest crops in contemporary society is no longer prevalent (Gold, 2002). The amount of time spent in formal learning environments also impacts desired results in reading scores (Cooper, 2003). Summer learning loss, or the lack of retention of knowledge due to extended time away from school, has proven to negatively impact not only mainstream society, but also those in low SES classes (Bracey, 2002; Cooper, 2003; Gerard, 2007). Students from low-income communities are at a greater academic loss due to a lack of exposure to education and academic practice and challenges (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2007). Also, during the summer months, these students may fall behind those in other income brackets due to their inability to attend summer enrichment programs. While Hispanic students have been able to

close achievement gaps within a few years of education, the gap continues to grow between African American and Caucasian students as the school years progress (Waldfogel, 2012). Waldfogel (2012) referred to a study reflecting a distinct difference in parenting practice as a contributing factor in the sustainment of this gap. On average, Caucasian parents incorporate more literacy and dialogue with their children than African American parents. Therefore, there is an increased likelihood in African American households of a larger decline in reading practices during summer months, requiring more review and remediation once the traditional school year begins (Brooks-Gunn & Markman, 2005).

### **Socioeconomic Status (SES) and Education**

One factor that has an impact on all children's academic achievement is their SES. Students living in impoverished communities face unique challenges that differ from students from non-impoverished households and communities. The challenges faced by students from high-poverty areas affect not only their access to necessary academic resources, but also their nutrition, feelings of self-efficacy, and feelings of safety and survival within their communities. According to the Children's Defense Fund (2017), 21% of American children under the age of 18 live in poverty, and 31% of those students are African American. Additionally, the Children's Defense Fund pointed out how the percentage of poor families with children receiving help from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program rose from 36% in 1997 to 74% in 2012, and 14.5% (17.6 million) of U.S. households had difficulty at some point in the year 2012 providing enough food for all their members due to a lack of resources. Many of those living in poverty, children included, do not receive balanced, nutritious meals (Drewnowski & Eichelsdoerfer, 2010; Ehrenfreund, 2016; Lo, 2016), despite the positive relationship between academic performance and proper nutrition (Anderson, Gallagher, &

Ramirez Ritchie, 2018; Just, 2014; Wilder Research, 2014). These students rely on food provided by the school, and these meals, while distributed in limited quantities, are sometimes their primary source of nutrition. However, while school systems attempt to supply students with balanced meals during the school day, these students may not get meals and snacks while at home.

Outside of nutritional inadequacies, students from low SES households may also lack the academic resources available to students from higher SES households (Ireson, 2005; Lee & Bowen, 2006). According to Coleman (1990), poor communities often have few to no academic tutoring facilities or libraries with both the technology and operating hours that allow students to complete schoolwork while outside of school. In addition, Heyward (2005) reports there is a need for working class families to also obtain affordable after school care and enrichment programs that will allow academic and socioemotional growth opportunities as parents work full time schedules. Abram (2011) discusses the impact of decreased government funding and how it has led to fewer public library hours in many states in recent decades. Considering issues with nutrition, access to tutoring facilities, limitations of public libraries, and parents in low SES households generally lacking the financial means to provide their children with school-related necessities, the chances for students from poor communities to succeed are greatly diminished (Lareau, 2002).

### **Stereotypes and Images of African American Males**

The literature on African American males' position in society is plentiful and overwhelmingly negative. African American men comprise over 40% of the prison population in the United States, despite making up only 14% of the national population (Boone, Rawson, & Vance, 2010). African American males are "roughly eight times more likely to be the victim of

homicide than whites in the same age group” (Child Trends Databank, 2015, p. 2). In addition, the unemployment rate for African American males at 6.8% is nearly twice that of Caucasian males at 3.7% (DePillis, 2018), and is frequently associated with apathetic behavior while ignoring social norms that have historically allowed one group an advantage over the other.

Researchers challenge the existing curriculum and posit it a priority of the education system as well as other American institutions to improve African American males’ situations, opportunities, and self-perceptions in society as early as grade school and continue to promote this positive image during their scholastic years (Banks, Cookson, Gay, Hawley et al, 2001; McMillian, 2004; & Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). Based on Dixon (2006) and Holt’s (2013) research, mainstream and social media channels are inundated with images of injustice against both African American men and women. These images can instill life-long memories in the minds of young, impressionable children who may internalize the negative images and grow to resent certain institutions who continue their legacy of suppression and helplessness against society (Dixon & Azocar, 2007).

### **Historical Influences on Contemporary Education**

Although an unpleasant topic, the history of African American people in America continues to have detrimental effects on the African American community. Some theorists and educators have argued that African American students are lazy and unmotivated (Devine, 1989; Devine & Elliot, 1995), while Hernstein and Murray (1994) have argued that African American students lack the mental capacity to perform as well as their Caucasian counterparts. However, many of those who promote such ill-regarded positions fail to realize the deep psychological and emotional impacts of history on contemporary society (Akbar, 1996; Azibo, 2010; Wilson, 1993). Although slavery was abolished in 1865, many of the attitudes drilled into African

Americans still prevail in modern times. Berlin (1998) and Rose (1970) discussed the illegality of teaching a slave to read and that the punishment for a slave who was caught reading would sometimes be up to 500 lashes because slave owners understood that a slave's acquisition of knowledge was detrimental to the existence of slavery itself.

Shortly after the Emancipation Proclamation granted freedom for African Americans living in slavery, the Jim Crow Era, which greatly deterred African Americans from seeking anything but peace from those who enslaved them, ensued (Burns, 1998; Packard, 2002). Packard (2002) reports of how education, equal rights, property ownership, and a general pursuit of happiness were all denied to those who were once enslaved. Over 100 years after abolition, many African Americans fought for equal rights in education during the Civil Rights Movement (Buss, 2009; McWhorter, 2008). The costly sacrifices that were made by African Americans during the Civil Rights Movement continued to deter many from seeking equality in education and in other realms (Andrews, 1997; Isaac, 2008).

While African American women were not excluded from those persecuted for actively seeking to exercise their rights as U.S. citizens, the image of the African American male was publicly and constantly desecrated and his life devalued to maintain control (Jones, Cross, & DeFour, 2007; Terhune, 2008; Young, 2003). The results were dually disadvantageous: (a) African American men had to exhibit aggressive behavior as a defense mechanism that ultimately justified wrongful treatment by others (Bandura, 1978; Orpinas & Frankowski, 2001; Thomas, Hammond, & Kohn-Wood, 2015); and (b) Belittling or embarrassing an African American man, in any situation (especially school), was not to be tolerated as it is suggestive of individual weakness that could no longer be tolerated (Brady, Gorman-Smith, Henry, & Tolan, 2008; Goldstein, Young, & Boyd, 2008; Scheier & Others, 1978; Thomas, Hammond, & Kohn-

Wood, 2015). The classroom environment was not excluded from these behavioral expectations. African American male students who find themselves publicly embarrassed in class—for any reason—tend to become resistant learners very early on (Goldstein, Young, & Boyd, 2008; Hudley & Graham, 1993). Therefore, it is important that educators are sensitive to the history surrounding the African American male experience and aware of the ways in which these experiences are visible in today's classrooms.

### **Gang Violence and African American Adolescent Males**

While gang affiliation and clique formation have been historically justified by the African American youth's desire to establish individuality, African American adolescent males face stiffer challenges than those in other ethnic minority groups (Gibbs, 2010; Kunjunfu, 2011; Morial, 2007). In a meta-analysis, Savage and Yancey (2008) reported a significant effect of the media on violent behavior, which adversely influences those entering or already in their teens. Viewing violence in the media is associated with higher levels of antisocial behavior, ranging from imitative violence directed against toys, to criminal violence and acceptance of violence as a solution to problems and increased feelings of hostility (Huesmann & Guerra, 1997; Paik & Comstock, 1994). Mainstream television and video game technology have become increasingly violent and significantly more realistic in their portrayal of violent crimes (Alleyne & Wood, 2014; Anderson, Berkowitz, Donnerstein, Huesmann, Johnson, Linz, & Malamuth, 2003). In becoming such, Anderson et al. (2003) contend frequent exposure to these games have, therefore, desensitized a generation to violence.

In addition, the African American community is inundated with negative portrayals of African American males engaging in street violence. The argument against what is considered rap music and its effect on the African American community continues. For example, Chen,

Miller, Grube, and Waiters (2006), and Wingood et al. (2003) reported increased violence, delinquency, substance use, and unsafe sexual activity as results of young people's exposure to rap music; however, in those studies linking rap music with certain negative behaviors, investigators were circumspect about whether they were observing a causal relationship and, if so, which came first, the music or the violent dispositions (B. L. Tatum, 1999). The negative imagery and depictions of violence constantly presented to African American male youth combined with the desire to belong or be accepted by their peers and the absence of male role models could very easily impact a young African American male's thoughts and actions more than their preferred genre of music (O'Brien, Daffern, Chu, & Thomas, 2013).

According to Cleopatra et al. (2004), absentee parents or poor parenting practices were identified as a cause of youth violence by almost half the students who identified adverse family situations as an issue in their lives. Gang violence, while not limited to any racial or ethnic group, is more prevalent in low-income communities where adults do not closely supervise children and parent-to-child nurturing is weak (Alleyne & Wood, 2014; Lenzi, Sharkey, Vieno, Mayworm, Dougherty, & Nylund-Gibson, 2015; Li, X., Stanton, B., Pack, R., Harris, C., et al. 2002). While rap music can be seen as violent in its content, it also provides many at-risk students something with which they can identify. Thus, rap music is more likely a probable connection between the target group and their lived experiences than a connection to violent behavior (Richardson & Scott, 2002).

### **African American Males and Academic Performance**

The statistics regarding African American student success are often discouraging, and these students are constantly inundated with negative statistical data in addition to constant social and media-based reminders of their history in America. Consequently, African American

students become apathetic, and because of their stage in cognitive development, begin to question the importance of school, society, and themselves. In high schools across America, the numbers of African American males being suspended and expelled far exceed their Caucasian male counterparts (Bailey, 1996; CNN.com, 1999; Duncan, 2002; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). According to Bailey and Paisley (2004), “The poor academic and social performance of African American male adolescents has been linked to the lack of role models, low self-esteem, hopelessness, productivity dysfunction, and low expectations by the school, communities, and society at-large” (p. 92).

The absence of African American students from advanced placement (AP) courses is a national phenomenon that is not easily explained. As Chau (2012) reported, 80% of African American prepared students chose not to partake in the AP exam administration, students considered to be prepared did not take an AP course the previous year, and those students were 14.7% of the 2011 graduating class. Chau also noted that only 9% of these students took an AP exam. Klopfenstein (2004) identified reasons ranging from more familial responsibilities to not showing up for class equipped with the tools needed to succeed to attempt to justify their absence.

Kunjufu (1985) described the fourth-grade failure syndrome as a period of transformation from the kinesthetic, interactive education offered in kindergarten through third grade to more processed, formalized learning characteristic of upper grades. During this time, teachers witness a decline in students’ interest in and enthusiasm for the learning process. African American males are more likely to be labeled as hyperactive and display more obstinate behavior during this time period as they struggle with the presentation of learning material or become bored with the curriculum. The lack of recognition of this common type of behavior clashes with public



school systems and their tendency to teach all students, regardless of gender or cultural differences, using the same materials and methodology (Blanchett, Brantlinger & Shealey, 2005). While the progress and rewards associated with the recognition of more individualized learning styles is continuously ignored, the elementary school curriculum, students who unconsciously prefer movement- and competition-based learning suffer tremendously. The result is more behavioral referrals and placement in special education programs, both of which have long-term, detrimental effects on children and communities overwhelmingly affected by this as African Americans are (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005).

Holzman (2006) noted that annually, the United States inappropriately labels nearly 20,000 African American students, particularly males, as mentally retarded. As a result, teachers lower their expectations for these students and consequently disallow them to perform at levels equal to their female and Caucasian counterparts. Special education labeling can also stem from the SES. An increase in the number of single-parent homes in which the parent does not have postsecondary education and does not understand the long-term implications of allowing special education services often affords a parent the unintelligible decision to accept the erroneous special education labeling, creating a life-long system of tracking in which the student is not placed in rigorous classes with their peers.

As students matriculate through middle and high school, adolescents are the ones most influenced by their peers, and parents become less active in these students' social and academic lives. Residing in single-parent homes also leads young African American males to seek guidance and mentorship from their friends, who may have similar acceptance and developmental issues. African American males may seek acceptance through participation in athletics as well as physical and verbal defensive mannerisms. Classrooms, teachers, and

administrators are not easily able to modify the school environment to accommodate the physicality and aggressive behavior that is increasingly becoming the cultural norm for African American adolescent males (Anderson, Berkowitz, Donnerstein, Huesmann, Johnson, Linz, & Malamuth, 2003; Brady, Gorman-Smith, Henry, & Tolan, 2008).

Examining the effects of neighborhoods on adolescent achievement, Gordon and Cui (2014) found that adolescents living in violent neighborhoods were more likely to internalize low self-efficacy beliefs; that is, beliefs of powerlessness regarding their ability to avoid violence in their immediate urban environment and, more generally, to succeed in the future. Referencing the social disorganization theory (Shaw & McKay, 1942), Gordon and Cui suggested, “residents residing in high poverty neighborhoods are less able to maintain collective cohesion for the good of the community” (p. 617). As boys enter their teenage years, they become more aware of their surroundings and social expectations that affect their actions in both the schools and community. It is highly likely that living in a violent community adversely affects one’s ability to focus on school or be confident in their scholastic development.

Conversely, Butler (2013) challenged the concept of what he identified as *Black exceptionalism* and discussed whether a true disparity exists between the Black male and the Black female and, if so, the way it should be addressed. In this subjective study, Butler posited that Black males’ problems overshadow those of Black females, but that equal attention must be offered to both sexes, and also that males should not be perpetually portrayed as victims in society. While addressing the issue of inconsistencies between males and females, Butler launched an assault against the character, research, and reputation of the Black community in offering racially charged statements such as, “probably there are more prominent African

American male role models, including the President of the United States, than African American female role models” (p. 486).

Butler (2013) failed to recognize virtually all the underlying circumstances that create the original issue of the lack of a positive public perception of African American males as well as the fact that there are few African American male role models in African American communities, as proven by the increasing number of single-parent homes. Attitudes similar to those offered by Butler (2013) tend to be inconsiderate of the overarching issues that originally created the racial injustice; instead placing the blame on those who are oftentimes considered the victims of racist, impoverished, and culturally depleted environments.

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

Research continues to show disproportionately high numbers of African American students placed in special education across the nation. Osher, Sims, and Woodruff (2002) found that in 29 states, African American males are twice as likely as their Caucasian counterparts to be labeled with emotional or behavioral disorders and, in 39 states, African American males are equally likely to be labelled as mentally retarded. This mislabeling is oftentimes justified solely on subjective assessments of these children’s capability based on their interactions with their peers and teachers. Typically, teachers recommend students for special education based on their ability to perform certain tasks. However, recommendations also stem from the child’s behavior and peer interactions as previously stated. Low teacher expectations of the child offer a level of subjectivity not easily distinguishable and moderated by the school system.

Contributing to the phenomenon, in a dated but highly relevant study, Rong (1996) found that Caucasian teachers favor Caucasian students over students from other ethnic groups, while African American teachers seemingly make no distinction in treatment. This suggests a direct

correlation between special education recommendations and a teacher's race. It is suggested here that Caucasian teachers are more apt to recommend African American students for special education services than are African American teachers. Additionally, Monroe (2006) identified several factors that led to more student referrals and more recommendations for educational behavioral services, including a lack of understanding of cultural norms and behaviors, students' speech choices, students' level of candor while speaking, students' highly animated body language, and students' physical punctuations. Mock fighting and loud, seemingly unruly behavior have also been identified as the source of unnecessary referrals for African American male students (Hilliard, 1992). The significantly lower number of African American females represented in special educational programs, then, can be attributed to their less animated and more docile mannerisms that are not seen as threatening and overly aggressive.

Some of the unfortunate results of African American male students being placed in special education include the higher probability of dropping out of school, entering the juvenile justice system, not attending college, and restrictions in job choice (Losen & Orfield, 2002; Sorrells, Webb-Johnson, & Townsend, 2004). These early special education labels may also lead individuals into a life of crime, which has adverse effects on entire African American communities, individuals' attitudes of self-deprecation and inadequacy, and lowered income status due to a lack of attainment of desired education and reaching personal goals. Being removed from mainstream classrooms and forced into those with lower expectations alters the quality of a student's education, his or her ability to be successful in high school, and his or her possibility of entering postsecondary schooling.

## **Suspension and Expulsion Rates For African American Male Adolescents**

The amount of time a student spends in the classroom or interacting with the teacher is directly related to his or her academic success (Camp, 2011; Wentzel, 1997). While students may be somewhat distracted during school, they ultimately have better chances to succeed when present. However, African American male student attendance is interrupted by high rates of suspension and expulsion. According to the Scott Ghee Report (as cited in Holzman, 2006), there is an overrepresentation of African American males in exclusionary discipline practices such as suspensions, expulsions, and disciplinary alternative education, while being suspended two to three times more often than other students.

Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education (2012) discussed how early this problem begins, noting that while African American children are only 18% of preschool enrollment, 48% of these children had been suspended more than once. This problem continues throughout African American youths' school years as the report revealed that African American students were only 16% of the student population but accounted for 32–42% of those suspended or expelled (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Even worse, African American students are referred to law enforcement officers for disciplinary action at a rate of 27% and have school-related arrest records at 31% (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

These numbers indicate significant disparities in student discipline across the spectrum of age and grade level. The problem has somewhat of a snowball effect when students return to school after being suspended or expelled and finds themselves much further behind in their schoolwork. This contributes to students losing even more interest in participating in school activities and learning. The result becomes students skipping classes, leaving school early to avoid classes where they have little hope or slimmer chances to pass, or becoming classroom

disruptions. Consequently, the referral process starts all over again until, oftentimes, a student's hope is severely diminished, if not altogether lost.

### **Differences in Cultural Speech Patterns**

Baugh (1996) pointed out the connection between African American students' speech and their cultural identity. After the 1972 publication of a series of nine papers exploring the topic of language and how people communicate appeared in the *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services of Schools (LSHSS)*, more interest has been garnered between the connection of cultural language and Standard American English or SAE (Baugh, 1996). According to Stockman (2010), the topic became so popular that "between 1970 and 2008, LSHSS alone published approximately 110 papers with titles focused on minority language and cultural issues inclusive of AAE [African American English]" (p. 23).

Speaking SAE is frequently rejected by African American students as it is too commonly associated with the vernacular of Caucasian students and it somewhat rejects one's ethnic or cultural identity. Ogbu (1981) referred to speaking in SAE as the *acting white* theory and is used to justify academic differences between African American and Caucasian students. In addition to rejecting the notion of assimilation into the mainstream vernacular, African American students, particularly from the lower socioeconomic class, are also considered to be acting White if they perform well in academics. Therefore, doing well in school could mean rejection from their peers and their community during a critical stage of social development and cultural development (Moore et al., 2012). As a result, these African American students may not complete schoolwork and may also behave in ways they deem socially acceptable as doing well in school could distance them from their peers. The long-term implications suggest this same

attitude extends to professional environments later in life as African Americans continue to be the ethnic minority and fail to relate to friends or coworkers (Forman, 2003).

The difference model suggests that difficulty in the acquisition and retention of the principles of SAE are tied to the differences between the written language and spoken cultural language patterns (Wiener & Cromer, 1967). The supposition of this model implies there must be either a change in the way reading material is presented to students or a change in students' social patterns and behavior. African American students' disconnect from reading stems from their inability to make concrete word associations between school readings and their social worlds. Although dated, Cromer and Weiner's research is relevant today. According to Burns, Griffin, and Snow (1999), children have difficulty offering elaboration of the cues using in formal language patterns and they may not read well because they do not draw from the same language experiences as does the middle-class child for whom a typical reading text is written. If, however, the material was presented in the same form as his or her spoken language, the authors posit that he would then be able to read more adequately.

For students, particularly African American male students, speaking SAE might require they reject mainstream social acceptance which might contribute self-efficacy issues. Males particularly are unable to abandon their peer groups to excel academically (Fordam, 1999; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

### **Single-Parent Homes and Parental Education**

Another factor contributing to achievement gaps affecting adolescent African American males is the family structure. Regardless of the presence of both parents in the home, Pate and Hamilton (1992) discussed that high parental involvement, emphasis on attendance, attention to grades, and the rearing style of the parent are all factors that contribute to positive educational

experiences and academic performance; however, many students lack these elements. Research also reveals that many failing students are from homes in which the parents have low levels of education while students who have parents with higher levels of education rank higher in their classes.

Additionally, the mother's level of education has the most direct and consistent impact on a child's behavior and academic performance (Corwyn & Bradley, 2002; Rhea & Otto, 2001). Because students from lower socioeconomic classes are often from single-parent homes in which the parent has little education beyond a high school diploma, they are less likely to receive the academic reinforcement at home for various reasons including a lack of parental involvement and a lack of necessary resources required to reiterate information presented in class. Parents are simply not always equipped to assist them with their school work or provide needed materials for class and sometimes are not available at all if working multiple jobs. Additionally, Sharma and Jha (2014), studied student achievement and parents' education and noted that the parents' level of education has a significant effect on student achievement, despite gender or public or private school type. Sharma (2014) revealed a need for stronger emphasis on parental education and involvement when examining student success.

While parents' education levels largely factor into student success, the issue of single-parent homes cannot be ignored. Shortly after the Civil Rights Movement, the number of two-parent households in African American communities began to decline. According to the 2012 U.S. Census, approximately 66% of African American households were headed by one parent, compared to 35% in the 1960s (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). In the post-Civil Rights era, government-run public assistance was more readily available to African Americans, and one theory suggests that this led to more female independence and less responsibility for fathers in



African American communities. Other theories trace broken families to their roots in slavery and an unfair judicial system, both of which normalize households void of two parents. Despite the cause, the deficiencies in homes that are without both parents—a lack of stability, lower income, and poor emotional attachments—have had long-term effects on society as a whole, but also extreme, negative impacts on African American males, who are exposed, almost daily, to negative propaganda related to their existence both in historical textbooks and in contemporary society.

Academic achievement and child development suffer when fathers are absent from the household. S. Kim, Massa, Zwanziger, and Henry (2014) discussed that children living consistently with a father in the same household were less likely to have behavioral problems. This finding supports that of Blankenhorn (1995), who earlier found that a father's absence has negative effects on child development and school achievement. The presence of fathers in the home contributes not only to the financial aspects of raising children, but also to a child's emotional growth and stability.

According to Parker and Reckdenwald (2008), the presence of employed, married African American men in the African American community significantly reduced the levels of juvenile arrest rates for violence. In addition, Parker and Reckdenwald noted that community violence can be mitigated by the presence of positive role models. While ethnic minorities in the state of Georgia have the highest dropout rates (Mauer, 2018), during the period of 2000-2016, members of the African American community also held an incarceration rate approximately 4.5% higher than Hispanic minorities and over 3% higher than Caucasian populations despite their classification of being a racial minority (Mauer, 2018). The absence of role models is a significant factor in determining any child's success or failure, particularly those with already

statistically dismal outlooks, such as African American males (Benner, Boyle, & Sadler, 2016; Bryant, 2017).

### **Identity and Self-Esteem**

According to B. Wright's (2009) study of racial and ethnic identity, research is usually focused on African American students' weaknesses instead of their strengths when exploring ways to increase levels of student success. In early 20th century America, social scientists associated African American students' lower achievement levels to laziness, lack of motivation, dysfunctional families, and even genetics (Hernstein & Murray, 1994; A. Jensen, 1969). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) argued that African Americans' lack of ethnic identity renders them "raceless" and that they should focus more on academic studies.

However, in recent studies of African Americans' behavior researchers have countered this idea on the premise that Caucasian Western European ideals being superimposed on African American students creates an air of resentment and self-fulfilling prophecies of failure (T. A. Wright, 2003). The feelings of inferiority become cyclical for future generations if not addressed, contributing to Skinner's (1974) concept of determinism. In order for free will to combat this spirit of determinism, African American students should learn about individuals who have overcome obstacles to escape their current conditions to combat these images of oppression and negativity (T. A. Wright, 2003). Failure to address this will only allow the perpetuation of being less than the average citizen in American society.

### **Self-Concept and Adolescence**

How one feels about him- or herself, or a person's self-concept, is reflected in the way one interacts with others and the goals a person sets for oneself. Adolescents are commonly confused about who they are and where they are in life. Skinner's (1974) determinism

component of behaviorism suggests individuals are a result of the environment in which they live. Based on Piaget's (1977) stages of cognitive development, adolescents move from concrete to formal stages in which thought becomes less tangible and more abstract. Adolescence, which is composed mainly of Freud's (1923) ego stage of development, is the fifth stage of identity and identity confusion in Erikson's (1959) eight stages of man (Erikson, 1959). The common denominator between these is the general identity confusion and grappling with positive self-concept those adolescents may experience.

While elementary students tend to seek approval from their school peers and gravitate away from parental guidance, young adults, adolescents, and/or teenagers are more aware of the world around them and how they might assimilate into it, so they struggle with how to address these issues. In school, an adolescent may be easily embarrassed when he or she does not know something, and he or she may even question the usefulness of content being covered in the classroom. This lack of confidence could lead to less effort being directed toward school and cause students to perform poorly and fall behind, as often seen in African American male teenagers. Griffin, Jayakumar, Jones, and Allen (2010) noted how those having lower income, possess less confidence and have lower grade point averages than peers in other ethnic groups, which makes them less likely to attend colleges. Griffin et al. confirmed how important having a strong self-concept is for African American adolescent males and how too much importance is assigned to how others perceive them. During these formative years, the opinions of others can drastically affect major decision made impacting their future. A lack of confidence may lead to a failure in African American males reaching their greatest potential in other areas of life beyond secondary academia. Postsecondary and work-based lives can also adversely impact income potential and, consequently, the quality of life for themselves and their families.

## College Readiness and Literacy

Both postsecondary institutions and employers agree that students are not equipped with the skills they need to be successful. In 2013, as little as 10% of African American high-school graduates met at least three of the ACT's four College-Readiness Benchmarks, compared to 39% of all graduates who took the test (Morones, 2014). Additionally, only 5% of the African American students tested were proficient in all four areas (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). In addition to poor performance, another result of inadequate preparation for African American students entering postsecondary education is that many are unable to meet academic demands and ultimately drop out.

Ruggles et al. (2009) stated that 45% of African American males graduating from high school have attempted college, but only 16% have completed college. The ability to read and decipher information is the foundation of college preparedness as it allows individuals to think independently and understand how to matriculate through school and understand the work presented to them. The nurturing of this ability begins in elementary school, and middle and high schools provide what can be considered an optimal opportunity for reading remediation and, ultimately, success in life as many people may not decide to return to school in later years. In Nemko (as cited in Chronicle Review, 2009), argues college degrees, in some cases, are losing value:

We now send 70 percent of high-school graduates to college, up from 40 percent in 1970. At the same time, employers are accelerating their offshoring, part-timing, and temping of as many white-collar jobs as possible. That results in ever more unemployed and underemployed B.A.'s. Meanwhile, there's a shortage of tradespeople to take the Obama infrastructure-rebuilding jobs. And you and I have

a hard time getting a reliable plumber even if we're willing to pay \$80 an hour-- more than many professors make. ("Are too many," 2009)

Lee (2010) adds to the discussion how government surveys indicate that the vast majority of job gains this year have gone to workers with only a high school education or less, casting some doubt on one of America's most deeply held convictions: that a college education is the ticket to the American Dream (para. 4).

While a suggested lack of need for postsecondary education may be true for businesses looking to save money by training their own employees, reading comprehension remains critical across various employment sectors, including vocational and trade jobs. Kneller (2013) reported that graduating from college offers more job opportunities and higher earnings over a lifetime. Findings as recent as 2011 show that there is a \$1 million difference in high school graduates' lifetime earnings compared with those whose highest level of education is a bachelor's degree; there is another \$1 million difference between those with a bachelor's degree and those with a doctorate (Kneller, 2013). Corroborating this finding, Yen (2014) purported how earning only a high school diploma leaves individuals more likely to live in poverty, and the margin has increased by 15% since in 1970s. In 2010, African American males were less than 6% of America's undergraduate student population (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Additionally, African American females were 66% of the nationwide graduating population while males held graduation rates close to 34% (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). The graduation rate data supports the disparity between males and females of the same race. The ability to read and comprehend information could be the root of this problem. Alternatively, E. Kim and Hargrove (2013) argued that the information that is publicly available regarding African American males and college only exacerbate the problem and perpetuate negative

stereotypes. While some of these students are able to effectively matriculate through college, the data continue to document an alarming number of students who fail to enter college and who do not graduate from college (Cheng, Suwanakul, & Wu, 2015; Cross & Slater, 2001; Ross, 2016).

### **Educator Influence**

Another major contributor to the failure or success of students is the means through which information is received: the teacher (Karp, 2010; Lopez, 2016; C. M. Rodriguez, 2014). Many educators working with low-income populations experience pressures neither widely known nor explored. While there are some available studies offering insight into the area of teacher anxiety and depression (Frenzel, Pekrun, Goetz, Daniels, Durksen, Becker-Kurz, & Klassen, 2016), the school climate as it relates to teacher the socioemotional health of the regular classroom teacher is still underserved (Tidd, 2016). As reported by Sellgren, The United Kingdom NASUWT teachers' union survey of more than 5,000 teachers revealed, "One in 10 teachers say they have been prescribed anti-depressant drugs to cope with the pressure of their jobs, says a teachers' union survey" (Sellgren, 2016, para.1). While this information is based in the UK, the notion of teacher fatigue and increased anxiety are seemingly similar globally (Chaplain, 2008; Frenzel, Pekrun, Goetz, Daniels, Durksen, Becker-Kurz, & Klassen, 2016). Unlike their suburban counterparts, teachers servicing urban and inner-city schools not only experience increased pressure to improve student performance on standardized test, but also to service the basic needs of many of their students, particularly those who are underserved (Timperley & Robinson, 2000).

Since the implementation of the NCLB Act (2002), teachers also have the added stress of meeting state standards of performance on standardized tests despite the challenges it poses for students, teacher, parents, and counselors (Dounay, 2000). As a result, educators, particularly in

Atlanta, Georgia, have resorted to extreme measures in order to reflect proficient testing levels of their students: cheating (Tagami, 2015). While cheating scandals have subsequently led to the creation of a committee to rewrite the federal law dealing with high-stakes testing, the ordeal ultimately affected the lives of several educators adversely (Tagami, 2015).

Students with high SES are exposed to 25–40 words by the age of 4, compared to 10–15 words by children with low SES (E. Jensen, 2009). Invariably, this learning gap will continue to grow and affect their educational outcomes forever. While paid the same salary as those teachers working with high and low SES students, the educators servicing African American adolescents are constantly challenged to implement new and innovative strategies to place African American adolescent males on grade level. Those teachers working at Title I schools, serving a large population of students receiving free or reduced lunch, are offered supplements for extra tutorials; however, the reality is they work longer hours and spend more time away from their families and this contributes to teacher fatigue (Furuta; 2015; Jeter, 2013; Knauer, 2014). Unlike stress, teacher burnout occurs over a sustained period of time and increases as responsibilities and expectations by others increases and support from administration and upper-level support decreases (Hobfoll & Freedy, 1993). Ironically, teacher burnout allegedly can only occur if there was an initial point when teachers were deeply invested both emotionally and professionally, or as stated by Pines (1993), “The root cause of burnout lies in our need to believe that our lives are meaningful, that the things we do—and consequently we ourselves—are useful and important” (p. 33). By these measures, to lose this enthusiasm for teaching can affect not only the physical aspects, but also the mental psyche, of an educator and, consequently, the students.

Teacher expectations have a substantial impact on student performance. Uhlenberg and Brown (2002) identified the lowered expectations of teachers to be a continuing issue in their

research. Additionally, Uhlenberg and Brown determined African American students appeared to be more sensitive to the perceptions of their teachers than were the Caucasian students. It is possible for teachers to unintentionally lower expectations based on sympathetic behavior, while simultaneously providing a disservice to the students. According to Ladson-Billings's (2009) study based on teacher and student relationships, higher expectations lead to a positive relationship that provides a foundation that increases the likelihood of academic success. Emdin (2016) suggested that all teachers, particularly Caucasian teachers, should avoid the mentality of saving students from their current conditions instead of attempting to understand their core values and motivation. A lack of understanding the students' background and culture could lead to feelings of inadequacy and resentment and perpetuate stereotypical attitudes toward the ethnic minority class. E. Jensen (2009) corroborated the need to avoid focusing on the situation and focusing on the individual by building positive relationships with those students living in poverty:

If a student had a good teacher as opposed to an average teacher for five years in a row, the increased learning would be sufficient to close entirely the average gap between a typical low-income student and a higher-income student. (p. 63)

Unfortunately, teacher attrition continues to increase and was recently measured at 8% for the 2011–2012 school year (Gray & Taie, 2015). The gap continued to grow as 17% of the 2011–2012 first-year teachers had left the classroom by 2012 (Gray & Taie, 2015). This contributed to the lack of experienced teachers available to service students and this experience and consistency is important to the educational development of all students, especially ethnic minorities. Overall, 10% of those who left cited salary as the cause and 16% moved to a different school (Gray &



Taie, 2015). Therefore, the data suggest more of an effort needs to be placed on teacher retention as well as their overall health in order to positively impact the students.

### **Opportunities to Read Outside of School**

Another potential barrier in encouraging reading involves the available opportunities to read outside of the regular school environment. While much focus on the lack of academic reading success or education in general is often placed on the individual children or their home environments, the overall community also plays a vital role in academic development (C. Cunningham, 2004; Haycock, 2007). Bernheimer, Gallimore, and Weisner (1990) and Neuman and Celano (2001) refer the ecocultural niche as the overall educational environment is composed of family, teachers, schools, corporate entities, and the overall community. Previous studies and reports have been focused on the lack of reading in various social classes without noting the distinct differences of the communities in which the students reside (Neuman & Celano, 2001). Failure to recognize communal differences potentially creates a false perception of students not engaging in reading habits by choice instead of opportunity.

Public libraries have undergone budget cuts through the latest presidential administration and the several administrations preceding it (Chrastka & Findley, 2018; Merlo-Vega & Chu, 2015). While a study conducted in South Carolina indicated higher standardized test scores may be attributed to the availability of librarians and media specialists, local public library hours continue to be adversely affected by federal budget cuts (Gavigan & Lance, 2015). Initially, the library was seen as a hub of resources for the school community, including individuals who may or may not have access to technology at home (Mead, 2005). Adding to the importance of the library, the Internet is a now common resource for school-related research, assistance from professional staff members, and applying for jobs (Barr, 2012; S. A. Watson, 2016). The

inaccessibility of these resources not only affects the students in question, but also others in the community.

On average, the school library remains open anywhere from an additional 30 minutes to an hour after the school day ends (Ibarrondo, 2016; Stephens, 2016). Alternately, the public libraries in the metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia, targeted area close most weekdays at 6:00 p.m., leaving students with potentially 2 hours to complete assignments or reading for pleasure. Combating this decision, Gavigan and Lance (2015) reported a link between better achievement rates and larger allocations to public school library programs in more than 12 states. In addition to shorter library hours, both the school and public libraries are moving more toward digital libraries and managing a tight budget in doing so. Public libraries also offer a connection between the domestic life and the workforce. Individuals utilize their local public libraries in order to adapt to society's ever-changing economic situations by incorporating training and using online resources to seek employment ("State of America's Libraries," 2012). While the digital library offers ease of use and satisfies some budgetary concerns, there do exist individuals who lack the software medium necessary to read e-books. Smart phones and tablets are commonly used to read e-books, but only by those who possess them and contribute to the reading barrier for those who cannot afford the hardware required to access reading material. Equally important, digital media is often read using phones or smaller tablets and can lead to eye strain, advertising pop-up distractions, social media interruptions, and the inability to easily annotate, highlight, or re-visit pages (Myrberg, 2017). Adding more angst to the situation is the costly repair of cracked screens and other types of damage that are not easily affordable to students and result in even more eye strain through cracked images. According to Asay (2015), the Square Trade industry

reported \$23.5 billion repairing or replacing phones and the cost is expected to rise in the years to come.

Outside of the media center or public library, few places exist that provide quiet reading opportunities for those in low-income living situations. Common study areas include libraries, coffee shops, book stores, parks, quiet areas at home, and classrooms (Education Corner, 2018). Low income communities may not have book stores and coffee shops in their neighborhoods and the community park may present additional problems. Working at home can be a challenge for a variety of reasons. Many students assist in caring for younger siblings, hold part-time jobs, or live in households with limited space and have an earlier assumption of adult responsibilities not evident in more affluent communities (Johnson & Mollborn, 2009).

### **Early Literacy Development**

Literacy reflects a comfort in reading and having the ability to understand the information as it is presented (Withers & Gill, 2013). In her emergent literacy and reading intervention theoretical studies, Clay (1998) emphasized that children absorb information from their surroundings and are constantly developing and acquiring vocabulary through media, songs, exposure to words, and books. E. Jensen (2009), again, argued that the exposure to words of children under the age of 4-years-old with low SES differs somewhere between 15- 20 million words less than that seen in middle and high SES pre-school aged children. This suggests early exposure to literature is a key element in developmental literacy, and in later years, in higher performing students. Due to the 69% of single family homes being categorized as low income, and another 41% identifying as poor, struggling single-parent homes may not be able to offer the necessary time and exposure to literacy as witnessed in more affluent single-parent or two-parent

homes where 32% reflect as low income and only 13% are reported as being poor (Koball & Jiang, 2018).

Willingham (2015) argued that those who read well enjoy reading and will develop a positive attitude toward reading that leads to more sustained, engaged reading activity. Reading aloud early also leads to dialogic reading, through which new vocabulary is acquired not only through new vocabulary, but also by hearing the formulation of various sentence types and structures (Willingham, 2015). Project Head Start was created in 1965 with the sole purpose of offering early intervention and learning strategies for children between the ages of 3 and 5 years of age living below the poverty line through the use of federal funding (Office of Head Start, 2018). Later, in 1995, the Early Head Start program was implemented in order to offer even earlier exposure to literacy by servicing expectant mothers and infants in addition to pre-school aged children (Office of Head Start, 2018). The creation of these entities was a direct result of the identification of the need for early literacy to be established in children, not only to create lifetime readership, but also better opportunities in multiple faucets in life.

### **Reading Fluency**

In studying oral passage reading fluency as an indicator of reading comprehension, Suchey (2009) found a direct correlation between the two, and therefore corroborated previous findings offering similar findings. However, although some students have the capacity to read fluently and decode words relatively quickly and confidently, they are still unfamiliar with the definition of the words leading to either a misinterpretation or lack of understanding of the text (Suchey, 2009). Reading fluency has been defined as “the ability to recognize and read words rapidly and accurately” (Nathan & Stanovich, 1991, p. 179). LaBerge and Samuels (1974) explained in their theory of automaticity that easily decoding words by sight allows readers to

focus on understanding how the words work within a text. Failure to read fluently and pausing to decode a word add distress to the immediate short-term memory and slow the ability to comprehend information (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974; Perfetti, 1985).

### **Reading Programs**

While a plethora of reading enrichment opportunities exist for adolescents living in the state of Georgia, information and the dissemination of such is sometimes sparse in many high schools. There is a lack of a streamlined system communicating these programs to teachers, who later present the information to students. While researching faltering reading programs in California, White (2003) found some teachers tasked with delivering summer reading program information were complacent and negligent of their responsibilities, therefore failing to offer students reading enrichment opportunities. Additional barriers to implementation included teachers not desiring association with a failing program if it was not successful. Yet still more issues found the process of implementing new reading programs to also be very cumbersome and onerous if several individuals and organizations became involved (White, 2003). White also reasoned how high teacher turnover could be detrimental not only to a school-based reading program, but also to streamlining the delivery of similar community-based information informing students of available programs.

While Title I federal funds are designated annually for various reading programs, the implementation, execution, and follow-up contributes to inconclusive information as to their effectiveness (U. S. Department of Education, 2016). Programs attempted in Georgia include, but are not limited to STAR Reader, Read 180, Accelerated Reader, Study Island, USA Test Prep, Reading Plus, American Reading Company, and the 100 Book Challenge. In M. A. Rodriguez's (2015) study of several reading programs targeted toward a Hispanic population, for

example, the Accelerated Reader program was not followed as prescribed due to lack of teacher dedication to its implementation. As a result, the lack of effectiveness of the Accelerated Reader program may have been adversely affected by the decision of the teacher to alter the protocol to better meet the needs of her students who did not have access to the program at home to complete the required amount of independent reading. In contrast, the 100 Book Challenge was more successful due to interest level and ease of use by the teacher as the facilitator (M. A. Rodriguez, 2015). Corroborating the importance of execution and application of computer-based programs in a separate study of another pair of programs, Pindiprolu and Forbush (2009) found reading improvements to be evident if they are adequately executed as instructed by the publisher.

### **Summary**

The topics discussed in Chapter Two frequently overlap, illustrating the overarching issue of African American male reading struggles. While the literature indicated several reasons why African American adolescent males have proven to be academically unsuccessful in public education arenas (Lockwood, 2015; Williams, 2010), there is little information available as to what causes students to fall behind initially, why they fail to overcome these obstacles, and the interventions that contribute to success in reading. Chapter Three includes discussion of the methods used to conduct this study of the lived experiences of African American adolescent males.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

Chapter Three includes a presentation of the qualitative design of the study and a restatement of the research questions, followed by a discussion of the targeted setting along with an anonymous description of the participants, and the procedures used to conduct the study. After a brief discussion of my role as the researcher in the study, there is an explanation of how the data were collected and analyzed. The chapter concludes with explanations of the measures used to ensure trustworthiness and the ethical considerations of the study.

### **Design**

The methods used in this transcendental phenomenological study were essential to promoting a deeper understanding of reading deficiencies in adolescent African American males. In completing a transcendental phenomenological study, the researcher “engages in disciplined and systematic efforts to set aside prejudgments’ regarding the phenomenon being investigated” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 22). As the researcher, I remained open and unbiased as the participants relayed information because the focus of the study was on how universal experiences create and help to understand feelings, perceptions, thoughts, and awareness (Moustakas, 1994). According to Creswell (2007), the purpose of a phenomenological design is to “describe the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon” (p. 57). Therefore, a phenomenological design was appropriate for the present study because it enabled me to gather “first-person reports of life experiences” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 84).

The design was intended to promote examination of the common and specific phenomenon of reading, include relevant participants based on their backgrounds and possible commonalities, and to understand how their lived experiences have shaped their response to

reading. In compliance with this component, I identified participants from similar communities and school settings who may share familiar history. The transcendental phenomenological design of the study required the past, personal reading experiences of the participants to be incorporated into the results of the study. The incorporation of these experiences was accomplished through semistructured individual interviews in which participants further elaborated on their responses, followed by one focus group interview set in a familiar and non-intimidating environment.

The focus group interview created an opportunity for participants to elaborate on their individual interview responses and to probe deeper as they listen and relate to the experiences of other participants. Finally, private online reflective journaling was used by participants to offer a final response or elaboration on topics previously discussed as well as to privately reflect and respond to the prompt. This transcendental phenomenological design was also adequate due to its epoché process of separating the researcher from the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Although my assumptions were evident, careful treatment of the data collected mitigated bias and subjectivity through bracketing reoccurring themes and, by design, this study served as an opportunity for African American adolescent male participants to offer their lived experiences and their feelings about reading.

## **Research Questions**

### **Central Research Question**

What are the lived experiences of 10th-grade African American male students who are struggling readers in the metro-Atlanta area?



## **Subquestions**

SQ1: How do 10th-grade African American male students who are struggling readers describe their attitudes toward reading?

SQ2: How do 10th-grade African American male students who are struggling readers perceive that reading challenges impact their views of self?

## **Setting**

The setting for this study was a school in a metropolitan city in Georgia, located approximately eight miles southwest of downtown Atlanta. To protect the names and identities of the participating students, pseudonyms were used for the name of the school and for all participants in the study. The school, to be referred to as Black Scholars High School (BSHS), houses over 1,600 students, and 98.5% of the student body is of ethnic and racial minority descent. The high school is a traditional school ranging from Grades 9 to 12, and it is classified as a Title I school. To be considered a Title I school and receive supplemental government funding, at least 40% of the student population must be classified as at or below the poverty rate (Gayl, Young, & Patterson, 2010; Rentner & Price, 2014). This designation is primarily based on information found within student lunch applications. BSHS is in the Fulton County School District, located in Fulton County.

## **Participants**

This study included a purposeful sampling of 12 African American male students classified as sophomores. All 12 of the study participants were first-time 10th-grade students. The purpose in selecting 12 students was to account for attrition and to maintain the minimum number of 12 required participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A 10th-grade student was defined as one who has completed all of the required courses in order to earn the rank and classification

of a high-school sophomore. No academic 504 students or students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) were included to maintain consistency in the study. The selected English language arts (ELA) teachers in the school selected students from their rosters to participate. All students had Lexile scores that indicated they were performing at least one level below the current reading level. A typical student in Grade 10 is usually between the ages of 15 and 16 years; however, students of other ages were allowed to participate if they met the criteria. In using this consistent type of purposive sampling, the trustworthiness of the study was less likely to be compromised.

To protect the identities of the students participating in the study, each student was assigned a pseudonym just as the name of the school was assigned a pseudonym. The pseudonyms were reflective of the cultural accuracy of the original name in an attempt to avoid disclosure of student identities.

### **Procedures**

Following a successful proposal defense, permission from the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) was sought to conduct the study (see Appendix A). After IRB approval was received, a research application signed by the research committee chair for the Atlanta Public School System was completed to request permission to conduct the study (see Appendix B). Next, I personally contacted potential the ELA teachers who taught sophomore students. After explaining the purpose of the study, I worked with them to identify students who were eligible to participate in the study (see Appendix C). Randomly selected students who agreed to participate then received a combined assent and consent letter to be signed by both the participants and their parent or guardian (see Appendix D).

After a maximum of 12 students were selected and permission to participate in the study was provided, a timeline of events was distributed. Participants were asked to participate in one audio-recorded individual interview lasting 10–15 minutes (see Appendix E). Another six participants were selected or volunteered to participate in a focus group interview held later on the same day (see Appendix F). Finally, all participants were asked to complete a reflective journal entry within 7 days of the study start date using the Remind 101 app (see Appendix G). The purpose of the condensed time period was to avoid interfering with coursework and time away from class and to avoid fatigue with the participants.

After the collection of data, an analysis of the recorded interviews and journals was completed. Extracting true, lived experiences of the target group was completed by identifying common themes found within their discourse and grouping the information according to subject matter. After the coding and classifying of common themes and ideas received from the participants, I was able to assess the information and begin interpreting the results by comparing information. Results are presented and visualized in Chapter Four and discussed in more detail in Chapter Five to provide an understanding of the experiences that are common to the struggling reader participants.

### **The Researcher's Role**

As an African American high school language arts teacher for nearly 20 years and younger sister to a brother who continues to struggle financially and emotionally over past experiences, this study holds both personal and professional importance for me. My only brother, who was academically mediocre and satisfied with receiving just passing grades during high school, now realizes the importance of a solid education. He also realizes that early academic underperformance has negatively impacted his life well beyond high school. I realize

how his financial struggles impact other members of the family and create uncomfortable situations for everyone involved. While my background and experiences are an integral part of who I am and may create certain bias, I understand the necessity of emotional separation in conducting a phenomenological study. While some of my presuppositions may be supported through research, according to Husserl:

We must take what is inwardly experienced . . . as our exemplary bases for acts of Ideation. Therefore, the origin of phenomenology requires scientifically based outcomes derive through descriptions that make possible an understanding of the meanings and essences of experience. (as cited in Moustakas, 1994, p. 84).

Additionally, I have observed the struggles—academic and nonacademic—of many other people from my earlier years, both male and female.

I report to my professional position daily, searching for connections between my knowledge of the world and success beyond high school and those things that my students are yet to discover. I understand their socioeconomic and emotional barriers, empathize with their lack of connection with reading material seemingly irrelevant to their lives, and constantly attempt to create a desire to read for them knowing the opportunities it can create. Elementary and middle school teachers are frequently blamed and cannot solely carry the blame for the lack of academic success of a student staring me in the face for an entire semester. My purpose and role, then, is to discover the personal and honest reasons why students lose interest in reading and continue to struggle in comprehension. Understanding the phenomenon may offer insight of how to adequately remediate these students in a way that is sensitive to their needs.

## **Data Collection**

Data collection for this transcendental phenomenological study included individual interviews, a focus group interview, and reflective journaling. The individual interviews provided me an opportunity, as the researcher, to gain the trust of the participants that resulted in candid reflections of factors that may have impacted their attitudes toward reading. In the focus group interview, participants with similar experiences discussed commonalities in their reading experiences. Finally, private, reflective journaling gave participants the opportunity to add information not previously mentioned or that needed further elaboration or clarification.

Semistructured interviews were conducted and participants were asked the same questions accompanied by follow-up questions in order to conduct a deeper exploration of the personal experiences of the participants (Arthur & Nazroo, 2003). Unlike a structured interview, a semistructured interview contains both open- and closed-ended questions that allow a researcher to hear the individual voices of the participants, who can respond beyond the actual question, which results in deeper insight to participant thoughts and feelings (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008).

### **Semistructured, Open-Ended Individual Interview Questions**

1. What do you think about when you hear the word “read?” Or, what thoughts, ideas, or things come to mind when you think of reading?
2. Describe what it was like for you living in the community in which you grew up.
3. Describe your earliest encounter or experience with reading—whether someone was reading to you or if you were reading on your own.
4. How do you feel about leisurely reading right now?
5. How do you feel about reading for school assignments?

6. Do your teachers, family members, or others influence your desire to read? If so, how? If not, why do you think this is the case?
7. Do you think there any long-term benefits in reading on a regular basis? If so, what are they? If not, why do you feel this way?
8. If there was ever a time when you began to like or dislike reading, around what age might it have been and what happened?
9. Do you think suspensions affect the interest in reading at all? If so, how?
10. Including your use of social media and daily occurrences, how many minutes or hours do you think you read in a typical day?
11. Do you feel your reading level, ability, or interest level affects your level of self-esteem in any way? If so, how? If not, explain.
12. What stereotypes do you think exist as it relates to your generation and reading?
13. How do you feel about those stereotypes?
14. Is there anything you would like to share about your past experiences with reading?

The questions for the interviews were created with the intention of eliciting responses from the participants that might need further elaboration for clarity and understanding. The central research question was as follows: What are the lived experiences of 10th-grade African American male students who are struggling readers in the metro-Atlanta area? This question was designed to allow participants freedom in their interpretation of the question and their responses to be genuine. Participants were encouraged to recount their earliest, positive memories of reading and build a verbal timeline to present day. It was the hope and intent of the researcher for the participant to recall a turning point in which reading was no longer engaging or a priority.

Interview Questions 1, 2, and 3 were used as an attempt to offer the participants an opportunity to introduce their background and possible upbringing that may have had an impact on their current attitudes toward reading. These questions also served to create a level of trust between the participants and the researcher as I validated their opinions by offering them a chance to respond openly and candidly without judgment. Interview Questions 4 and 5 afforded the participants an opportunity to differentiate their feelings between reading for pleasure versus reading for academic purposes. It was assumed that the participants would not have an interest in reading for pleasure as they are already considered to be struggling readers. However, allowing them to respond gave them an opportunity to verbalize reasons that contribute to their reluctance in reading.

Interview Questions 6 and 7 were used to explore participants' understanding of the relevance and importance of reading in general and to offer insight as to their knowledge of the long-term financial and educational implications in reading success. Interview Question 8 required the participants to reflect on past experiences that may have adversely affected their desire or interest in reading, while Interview Questions 9 and 10 served as attempts to learn of external or social factors that may affect their interest in reading or having time to do so. Interview Question 11 delves into the aspect of self-efficacy and self-perception as it relates to reading challenges. Interview Question 12 offered the participants an opportunity to share prior knowledge of stereotypical attitudes that may impact their perception of self, while Interview Question 13 was used to ask about their feelings associated with those stereotypes. Finally, Interview Question 14 prompted the participants to respond openly and offer experiences or information they considered to be important in understanding their perspectives. Overall, the interview questions prompted the participants to describe their current attitudes toward reading

and were designed to understand the environmental and academic factors that may affect the desire or interest in reading. Whiting (2009) attributed both of these factors as being highly influential in instilling a desire to read.

### **Focus Group Interview Questions**

1. How many books have you read in the past year?
2. What genre or types of books do you prefer to read?
3. What do you think of students, particularly boys, who read a lot?
4. Do you struggle at all when reading books in class? If so, in what way? If not, why do you not select more challenging books?
5. Do you have a method for figuring out the meanings of words? What is it?
6. Do you easily forget what you have read? If so, why do you think this happens?
7. Do you think reading relates to real life? How? Or, why not?
8. If applicable, what do you think keeps you from reading or motivates you to read? If applicable, what motivates you to read?
9. What social factors affect your desire or opportunity to read for pleasure? (Think about video games, extra-curricular activities, time with friend, and social media.
10. What do you believe to be the purpose of reading?
11. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being very true and 1 being not true at all, please rate the following:
  - You enjoy reading books you read in class.
  - You enjoy reading books you select for yourself
  - You would read more if you had time.
  - Your friends affect your desire or time to read.



- You enjoy reading out loud in class.
- Teachers assist you with your reading.
- You understand the importance of reading fluently and understanding passages.

After conducting the interviews, a focus group interview composed of ten students was held at their home school, BSHS. During the focus group interview, participants were asked several open-ended questions to allow participants an opportunity to respond openly and more comfortably as well as to possibly prompt responses that may not have been provided during the individual interviews. The focus group interview was ideal for this study because it allowed the participants with similar experiences and cultural backgrounds to verbalize their experiences in reading (Krugar & Casey, 2014). The focus group interview was also audio-recorded for later transcription.

### **Reflective Journaling**

Participants were also asked to respond to questions in a reflective journal using the Remind101 app, which also served as communication platform between me, as the researcher, and the participants. The journal prompts were delivered to all the participants individually after the completion of the focus group interview. The journals provided participants with an opportunity, in a nonthreatening environment, to offer deeper reflections about their experiences as struggling readers (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The journal prompts included the following:

1. Reflect on your personal experiences with reading. Are there any particular experiences that stifled your desire to read that you have not previously shared?  
Describe the incident.
2. Think about how you read again. What prevents you from reading or reading more challenging texts?

3. If applicable, do you think you would read for pleasure? Explain your response.
4. Who do you think influences your desire to read the most? Why?
5. Thinking about the one-on-one interview or the focus group (if applicable), what feelings or memories did it create for you as it relates to reading that have not been shared?
6. What would you like to say about the purpose of this study?

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was completed using the data analysis spiral approach while focusing on the phenomenological analysis and representation processes outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018). The analysis process included a variation of Moustakas's (1994) and Schutz's (1999) reductionism approach to transcribing material. As emphasized by Creswell and Poth (2018), the acquisition and interpretation of data is not a fixed linear approach, but a circular one that involves reincorporation of information during the research process.

After completion of the individual interviews, focus group interview, and reflective journals, the data were analyzed using the Creswell and Poth (2018) simplified version of the Moustakas and the Steven-Colaizzi-Keen data analysis methods. In following the paradigm, I described my personal experience with African American adolescent male struggling readers in order to create transparency of my own experiences and allow the focus to rest solely on the participants. This required any biases I have to be clearly exposed and, to the extent possible, removed from the study. Next, the participants' responses were managed and organized through horizontalization by developing a list of similar or common statements made by participants.

As the horizontalization of the individual interviews, focus groups, and reflective journals was conducted, similar phrases or information were categorized or classified into separate and

nonoverlapping or nonrepetitive themes by topic (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Horizontalizing the information allowed me to categorize and then describe what happened in the life of the participants as a whole. Using the various themes referenced by the participants also helped to create the required textual descriptions of what the participants experienced and how there may have been similar patterns in those experiences. During this stage, irrelevant information was dismissed if it neither directly nor indirectly impacted the struggling reader phenomenon study topic. This process was conducted with a paper-based approach using Post-It notes to most efficiently view data and streamline information received from the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

I developed and assessed the information in order to offer structural descriptions of the lived experiences of struggling readers (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Structural descriptions do not only include the responses of the participants, but also what the setting and context offer to the study and how the experiences occurred.

Finally, the analysis presented a visualization of the data through a composite description of the African American adolescent male struggling reader phenomenon. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), “a composite description incorporates both the textual and structural descriptions” (p. 201). Therefore, as a final step in the data analysis process, the information obtained through the study and from the participants was used to offer an analysis of what the participants experienced as struggling readers and how it was experienced. The information provided during the study may offer a better understanding of the situations that contribute to African American adolescent males becoming struggling readers.

## **Trustworthiness**

To ensure the findings of the study were trustworthy and valid, the following measures were utilized to address credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

### **Credibility**

The credibility of the study was maintained through triangulation; obtaining data from three sources. The chosen triangulation methods were individual interviews, a focus group interview, and a reflective journal (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To maintain truthfulness in any study, the results must be verified and cross-examined by those in similar professions or areas of expertise. In this case, the credibility was verified and cross-examined by the actual students in order to maintain the integrity of the information presented in the study. A final effective method in maintaining the credibility of this research was to allow participants to review the materials for accuracy prior to the reporting of the research findings in order to check for misinterpretations or inadequacies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through member checking, if information was found to be misinterpreted, according to the participants, it was correctly modified or eliminated.

### **Dependability and Confirmability**

In creating consistency within the study, the context and setting of the study were detailed and confirmed by the participants. The participants were asked at least once during all platforms of data collection to restate what they believed to be the purpose of the study to verify consistency. The setting was also an integral part of each discussion in order to understand whether it inhibited or encouraged honest and collaboration of the discussion. While the third method, reflective journaling, took place at the participants' desired location, it was expected that he would be comfortable and able to respond freely. Allowing participants to respond in various

settings offers openness and self-expression that allow genuine responses to the questions presented. The recorded responses to questions also provided another layer of confirmability. The responses were confirmed periodically, and questionable comments redirected for clarification to avoid misinterpretation.

### **Transferability**

Transferability refers to the applicability of the research findings to another setting or group (Moustakas, 1994). Transferability, in this study, could be monumental as it can potentially transcend the targeted geographical area (i.e., metro-Atlanta area) to other large metropolitan school districts facing similar issues with struggling readers. If the results of the study can be transferred to similar populations, then discussions and techniques pertaining to remediation for both racial and ethnic minority student populations as a whole can effectively begin.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations were implemented by securing all physical data in a locked file cabinet and all electronic data on a password-protected computer. The names of the students participating in the study were not used, but participants were assigned culturally similar pseudonyms to maintain the reliability of the data. Any student records accessed for the study, if saved or stored, were protected and stored in a vault in the school counselor's office.

Personal bias is yet another ethical consideration that was taken into account. This bias was addressed by focusing on the transcribed data offered by the participants and eliminating leading questions or comments during the individual interview and focus group discussions. The information required to complete the IRB application was also helpful in eliminating bias and extraneous prejudices that could have impacted the results of the study. Additionally, the use of

pseudonyms in protecting the identity of the participants also underlined credibility as well as ethical practices.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to better understand the lived experiences of African American adolescent males and their struggles with reading. Chapter Three included an outline of the transcendental phenomenological design of the study and details about the metro-Atlanta, Georgia high school setting from where the 12 African American male participants were purposefully selected. The chapter also included the data collection procedures for collecting, storing, and analyzing data in order to maintain trustworthiness. The study overall offered insight into how the experiences of the participants have shaped their struggles in reading and a better understanding of elements that combine to contribute to the phenomenon.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of 10th-grade African American male students who are struggling readers in the metro-Atlanta area. Transcendental phenomenology was employed to focus on participant experiences of 12 high-school male African American sophomore students who struggle with reading. Chapter Four is a presentation of the school demographics, participant descriptions, individual interview responses, focus group interview responses, reflective journal entries, emerged themes with subthemes and codes, research findings, and a summary. Results are presented in relation to identified themes based on the research questions guiding this study. Participant experiences regarding the themes are also presented. Research questions are answered following the discussion of the identified themes.

### **Participants**

The participants for this study were high-school African American males who were classified as sophomores as well as struggling readers. At the time of the study, all students were enrolled at the school assigned the pseudonym of BSHS. Purposeful sampling was used to identify eligible participants meeting the requirements of being metro-Atlanta-based 10th grade African American males with a reading Lexile level at least one grade level below their current grade. BSHS is located approximately eight miles from downtown Atlanta, Georgia and is labeled a Title I school, meaning at least 40% of the student population receive free or reduced lunch. At BSHS, 100% of the 1,698-student population receives a free lunch. The demographic makeup of this school is 68% African American, 28% Hispanic, 1.5% Caucasian, and 1.6% Multiracial (Georgia Department of Education [GADOE], 2018). Participants included 12

African American males from one school. The recruitment of participants was conducted through collaboration with their current ELA teacher. Students were informed of the study and asked to volunteer to participate in the individual interviews. Once the individual interviews were completed, I asked students if they would be interested in returning for the focus group interview at 2:00 p.m. on the same day. Of the original 12 participants, 10 agreed to return for the focus group. All members agreed to complete the reflective journaling; however, four did not respond to any of the reflective journal questions, and only six completed all journal questions. In studying the phenomenon, it was hoped an all-inclusive sample of students with various interests would be generated, but there was a large number of athletes who volunteered to participate. Demographics for the participants were unknown prior to the study and limited insight was gained based on the limited responses offered to the questions asked. All participants reside within the school district and through the individual interviewing process, grouping occurred naturally as distinctive characteristics of participants' lives emerged.

### **Carenzo**

At the time of the study, Carenzo, an African American male athlete, was 16 years old, very engaging, cooperative, bold, and transparent in responding to questions from the individual interview and reflective journaling. He was also well-respected and responsive during the focus group interview. However, Carenzo expressed a deep disdain for reading. His dislike began in the third grade after a negative encounter with a teacher. Carenzo is from a two-parent extended home where his grandmother, whom he deeply admires, lives with him. He mentioned how he moved often during grammar school years and spoke of being suspended numerous times over conflicts with other students as a result of being the new student at school. He was also the only participant who understood how suspension directly impacts reading and learning. Carenzo was



the quarterback of the varsity football team and was deeply respected by the participants during the focus group discussion.

### **Derrick**

At the time of the study, Derrick was 16 years old. As an athlete, he ran track and played basketball. Derrick's earliest memory with reading was his mother reading *The Cat in the Hat*. Reading was getting easier to him as he read more on his own. He did not like the assigned reading given to him in school. His mother encourages everyday reading habits, but he could not think of anyone who specifically encourages him to read. In the fifth grade, he read a book about LeBron James that sparked an interest in reading, but he has not continued to read outside of time spent on social media. Derrick was the first participant who enthusiastically remembered reading *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* but admitted he did not like reading in front of class. When thinking of stereotypical attitudes toward reading, he mentioned it is "weird" how people used to like reading for pleasure but acknowledged the stereotype that African Americans do not like reading. Derrick completed both the individual interview and the focus group interview but did not choose to complete any of the reflective journal questions.

### **Eric**

At the time of the study, Eric was a 17-year-old basketball player who was 6 feet, 6 inches tall, and by far the quietest participant. He grew up in a small town in North Carolina, lived with his mother, and came from a large family. He had no idea what his reading level was and originally declined to attend the voluntary focus group interview, but later changed his mind for an unknown reason. He sat quietly and twisted his hair as the focus group discussion was carried out and only spoke to modestly defend himself when other athletes made jokes about

him. His volume in speaking was often inaudible, his responses were very brief and succinct, and he did not express an interest in any source of reading.

### **Justin**

At the time of the study, Justin was 16 years old and did not play sports. He recounted growing up in an apartment complex and how “sometimes it was quiet and sometimes it was loud, but everyone knew each other.” He continued to explain how he loves living in a house now with his mother and other siblings. While it was not clear whether or not he lives with both parents, he did mention how his father expects him to read when they dine out together. Justin was somewhat soft-spoken and was not a major contributor during the focus group interview. He was also very respectful, mannerly, and understood the importance of reading. He preferred to read comic books and animae.

### **Keontae**

At the time of the study, Keontae was 16 years old and unknowingly held the highest reading score of the research study group, even though he disliked reading. He was a cornerback for the varsity football team. Keontae recalled living and arguing with his older brother, but now only lives with his mother and misses his sibling. He is the youngest child in the family and easily remembered learning to read using sight words. He reads for meaning and commonly skims the reading to search for answers. Keontae’s mother emphasizes the importance of reading and uses understanding athletic contracts as a means of validating the importance of reading. He lost his interest in reading at the age of 13 after he obtained his smartphone because the phone gave him something more interesting to do than reading. He also said he reads in school the majority of the time he is there. He was unbothered by stereotypes about African

American readers due to his personal level of confidence and counters with evidence of students who enjoy reading what is interesting.

### **Khalil**

At the time of the study, Khalil was a 16-year-old defensive tackle football player. Having parents who are both educators, he understood the importance of reading and was confident in his reading ability. He loves sports and admits academics are secondary to athletics. Khalil also admitted to having full intentions of focusing more on school work, but was too exhausted after practice to do anything other than bathing and sleeping. Unlike other participants, Khalil's personality seemed to shift from the cooperative, respectful respondent seen in the individual interview to a more abrasive, joking, and often insulting student during the focus group interview. Those targeted by his jokes were the quiet athletes who apparently were not as active on the field. When he was asked why he chose to insult them, his response was, "I have to say something to them before they get on me."

### **Mario**

At the time of the study, Mario was 16 years old. He is a soft-spoken, only child who lives with his mother in a neighborhood where he recalled hearing shooting at night. His mother taught him how to read at an early age, but he does little leisurely reading now. Mario only reads because he knew it must be done in order to graduate and his language arts teacher was the only one who really stressed reading or encouraged him to read. He remembered having to read aloud in class and classmates picking on him, so he did not want to read anymore. He realized he needed to study more to do well in class and on standardized tests, but he did not try as hard as he could. Mario did not openly participate in the focus group discussion, but he did choose to attend the session.

**Mark**

At the time of the study, Mark was 16 years old and not an athlete at the school. He is a middle child who grew up in a quiet neighborhood. He has four siblings, but only lives with one in the household and admitted to having low self-esteem for an unspecified reason. He also admitted that he is easily confused when reading and cited kindergarten as the point when he became disengaged in reading after not being able to pronounce the word *the* when reading aloud. After that embarrassing incident, Mark started attending another teacher's class, but the incident was very vivid in his memory. While he understood the negative stereotypical attitudes toward African Americans and reading, he mentioned, "If we really put our minds to it, we can really prove them wrong." He prefers nonfictional reading, and has an uncle (his mentor) who checks on his school work. Mark picked up an interest in reading again the previous year because he understood how it helps him read better in class.

**Oscar**

At the time of the study, Oscar was a 16-year-old varsity football player who also enjoyed gaming. He has five siblings and he is a middle child. Oscar openly admitted to stuttering when reading aloud in class. He does not have a problem reading assigned texts, but does not enjoy leisurely reading. Oscar's mother encourages him to read and he did not mind reading books about sports, comics, and gaming. Oscar did not attend the focus group interview discussion and admitted he does not hate reading; he simply has other things to do. He felt like standardized tests did not reflect his level of intelligence.

**Paul**

At the time of the study, Paul was 16 years old and did not have an issue with reading. He recalled his mother reading him bedtime stories as a young child and was frequently

questioned about his academics by family members, particularly his paternal relatives. Paul is the youngest of three boys living with his mother and remembered beginning to dislike reading around the age of 6 or 7 years old due to being forced to read by his mother. However, now he randomly read books if he was bored at lunch. Paul communicates in a confident manner and disputed the stereotypes, stating, "Not all Black teenagers rob, steal, shoot, or go to jail. Some Black teenagers do read, not all of them, but the majority of 'em do." Paul chose to participate in the focus group discussion and contributed to the conversation but did not respond to the reflective journal entries.

### **Terrence**

At the time of the study, Terrence was a lively 16-year-old born into a large family in Mississippi. He had moved to the school district in the previous year. His father encourages him to read something every day, but Terrence said he lost his interest in reading in the previous year due to boring content. He was an avid gamer who was known for his gaming interest by his peers. Terrence was forced to read by his reading teacher during the week of the study and admitted he enjoyed the book and was now interested in reading more books about cars. Despite being relatively new to the community and not being an athlete, Terrence fared well in the focus group discussion dominated by athletes and was not intimidated or targeted by the other participants while remaining actively engaged in the discussion.

### **Xavier**

At the time of the study, Xavier was 15 years old and a 6 foot and 4 inch tall varsity football player who was aware of his reading Lexile score. He was very confident in his reading ability and skill level. He enjoyed reading about sports but admitted he did not read as much as he did in elementary school. Xavier is an only child living with his mother. He appeared to be

an independent thinker and was not targeted by the other athletes during the focus group interview despite his quiet disposition. Xavier formerly attended a private school and was informed of his reading level upon entering public school. As he became older, other things “occupied his time” but he would occasionally pick up a book to read. His family read to him as a child and he often checked out books from the library as well as purchased books from book fairs to add to the bookcase in his room.

### **Results**

This study was guided by one main research question and two research subquestions addressing the lived experiences of 10th-grade African American males who struggle with reading. Emergent themes and subthemes are described in the following paragraphs.

Prior to beginning the individual interviews, participants were allowed a few moments to read over the questions in hopes of providing thoughtful responses. Participants were also given a copy of the questions in the event they needed to refer to them prior to responding. This proved helpful during several interviews as some participants grappled with answering questions. Only a few participants decided to answer freely and openly and offer personal information that may have impacted their attitudes toward reading. During the analysis of individual interview, focus group, and reflective journaling responses, the common experiences and opinions of the participants easily emerged and common themes superseded various backgrounds and interests. The transcribing, coding, bracketing, and grouping the data allowed me to relive the participant interviews in order to gain a more in-depth insight into their individual experiences while making connections with the experiences of other participants. All things combined presented an all-inclusive and genuine understanding of the feelings and motivations leading to their current attitudes toward the targeted phenomenon of struggling readers.

Ultimately, 12 students participated in the study overall. All 12 completed the individual interview, while only 10 chose to return to complete the focus group interview. However, despite having agreed to do so, only six participants completed all six of the reflective journal questions. After I introduced myself as an experienced ELA teacher, the participants appeared to be slightly more relaxed. Participants were encouraged to speak freely about their experiences with and feelings about reading and much insight was gained in relation to their level of confidence during their speaking and in viewing their body language. The vast majority of emergent themes were interconnected, and this allowed a better data analysis opportunity to determine the codes and subthemes. Themes, subthemes, and codes are listed in Table 1.

Table 1

*Major Themes, Subthemes, and Codes*

Subtheme	Code
Theme: Boredom	
Low interest level & unrelatable content	Like reading about things relevant to their lives (11) Like playing competitive games in class (7) Do not like assigned books (Exceptions: <i>The Outsiders</i> , <i>Diary of a Wimpy Kid</i> , <i>Lord of the Flies</i> ; 5) Extrinsic motivation (4) Might have more luck with self-selected books (4) Boring books & materials (3) Length of books is intimidating (3) “No purpose of school after sixth grade” (3)
Lack comprehension	Don’t understand questions on standardized tests (4) Reading comprehension issues (4) Dislike passage reading due to difficulty (2)

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Subtheme	Code
Theme: Social anxiety	
Low self-esteem	Fear of making mistakes (8) Embarrassing (7) Teachers help you feel more comfortable or less comfortable reading (7) Makes you feel bad when you can't read (3) Doesn't like reading aloud (stutters; 2) Not fluent readers (2)
Public attitude & stereotypes	Offended by stereotypes (8) Everything changed in middle school (5) Friends do affect reading habits: they will pick on you if you don't read well (5) Blacks can't read (4) Blacks don't read (3) Blacks don't care about reading (2) Don't judge a book by its cover (2) Ignore the stereotype (2) Not true for everyone (2)
Theme: Knowledge	
Confidence in reading ability and lack of understanding deficiency	Do not know their reading level (7) "You use context clues to figure out what it means" (3) Think they are fluent readers (2)
Understand the relevance	Understand the purpose of reading well (12) Reading is fundamental for life (8) Reading offers knowledge and vocabulary (6)
Relationship to suspensions	Don't think suspensions affect reading interest (10) Bigger vocabulary words make you look smart (3) People who read don't get suspended (3) Reading offers knowledge (3)
Theme: Alternate forms of reading	
What is considered reading material	Reading isn't limited to books introduced in school (4) Frequently read and analyze rap lyrics (No Cap & Rylo Rodriguez; 3) "If it's interesting, I'll go back and read through the lyrics and figure out what they're saying" (2)
Daily reading practices	Consider social media as reading time (12) Likes: Sports, crime, non-fiction, comic books, graphic novels (12) Reading in school (12) Any exposure to words is considered reading (8) Consider gaming time as reading (3) Reading daily signs and words (3)

(continued)



Table 1 (continued)

Subtheme	Code
Theme: Barriers to reading	
Lack of exposure to reading opportunities	Remember reading in elementary school (12) Few or no books at home (4) Only read one book per year in class (4) Book Shortage: “no books in the library” (2) Feel unwelcome in the library (2)
Time factor	Sports occupy time (10) Always on my phone (9) There’s no time to read: People in jail read a lot because they have time (2)
Familial influences	Shower, eat, and sleep after practice (5) “My family always ask how I’m doing in school” (4) My mom used to read to me (3) Where you live is less important than with whom you live (“loud” neighborhoods) (3)
Theme: Required reading	
Academic reading required for school	Don’t mind reading for school (12) Read in every class (12) You have to read for school (12) “It’s necessary for life...” (10) Read all day in school during class (9) Take too many tests in school (9) Question relevance of material covered in class (7) Technical reading (contracts) is a necessity (5) Only read out of necessity – skim through (4) No one understands questions on standardized tests (3)
Reading related to extra-curricular activities	Must pass classes to play sports (7) Read sports stats and rankings to stay informed (4) Need to be able to read the plays (2)

During data analysis, several subthemes emerged during coding of the transcripts.

Ultimately, the themes were grouped into six major themes, including (a) boredom, (b) social anxiety, (c) knowledge, (d) alternate forms of reading, (e) barriers to reading, and (f) required reading. After coding, bracketing, and categorizing, the themes emerged organically. Both codes and subthemes funneled to generate the overarching themes. I was able to collapse themes and subthemes based on their codability and provide the “synthesis of meanings and essences of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 184). The lived experiences of all participants were documented by their responses throughout the study.

## Major Theme 1: Boredom

The first major theme to emerge during data analysis was boredom. Participant's offered various reasons outlining why there is a lack of interest in reading selections and reading for pleasure in general. Participants shared their lived experiences and characteristics that contributed to the boredom in reading as it related to their personal and individual experiences.

**Low interest and unrelatable content.** During data analysis, the first subtheme to emerge from the major theme of boredom with reading selections was that of low interest and unrelatable content. With the exception of *The Outsiders*, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, and a portion of *Lord of the Flies*, all participants expressed a lack of interest in the reading selections presented to them overall in their scholastic career. Of the books mentioned, only one was read during their high school tenure. All expressed a high interest in sports, gaming, mystery, and nonfiction selections; but said those are not the genres provided in school. This theme was clear in virtually all responses offered, including the two participants who were not averse to reading. Even in the case of books of which content may have been of interest, particularly *Lord of the Flies*, during the focus group several participants initially expressed an interest in the subject matter, but at least four almost simultaneously commented, "I didn't even read it," followed by participant jokingly noting, "I read the first chapter," and a final response of, "I read the first two sentences and then I just zoned out," was also noted in the data analysis. This was the most recent book assigned to read in their English class, and the point at which students questioned the relevance of the reading selections by schools.

To corroborate the lackluster reading selections offered, two participants specifically expressed a strong dislike for passage reading related to test preparation. These types of reading assignments are frequently assigned in preparation for standardized tests, which all the

participants indicated are unnecessary and not beneficial. *The Outsiders* was praised for its action, murder, and villainous story line; and for maintaining their interest. It quickly emerged as a theme as the participants became excited recounting events and characters from the novel. They remembered names, events, and when the book was read. The only recollection of *Lord of the Flies* was that a plane crashed and a group of boys were alone. Other novels were forgotten due to a lack of memory of the events and storyline that failed to hold their interest. A frequent response referenced why they were not presented with books that related to “real life.” During the focus group, one participant, Khalil, noted, “I don’t think I need school after sixth grade cause everything else we learned up until the sixth grade. Everything after that is common sense.” Carenzo also offered, “It should be optional . . . we keep relearning the same subject over and over. We take tests almost every two to three weeks.” The remaining participants either verbally or visually agreed with his statement. These words and actions reflect the negative, almost resistant, attitudes the participants had about reading material being of little interest to them.

**Lack of comprehension.** During data analysis, the second subtheme to emerge from the major theme of boredom with reading selections was the lack of reading comprehension. Understanding the material being presented was another point of contention within the individual interviews and focus group discussion. Several participants admitted to not understanding questions on standardized tests and disliking passage-reading assignments received in preparation for the test. Oscar felt he was “smarter doing other things than tests” and his level of intellect could not be assessed by a standardized test alone; while Derrick stated how “some of the questions be just weird and different.” Mark offered how it did not make sense to take the tests because “half the stuff on there is not even what they taught us. What is the point of us

taking the test on stuff you all haven't taught?" Mario admitted, "It takes a little bit more for me to understand what I'm doing. So . . . I don't be prepared 'cause I don't like studying." While most participants disagreed with the concept of standardized testing, known in Georgia as the Georgia Milestones Assessment, Xavier and Paul were slightly more optimistic about testing in saying the test measures where students are and how, despite their dislike of testing, they understood that tests have to be taken. Several participants also admitted they did not understand the questions found on the test.

### **Major Theme 2: Social Anxiety**

The second major theme to emerge during data analysis was social anxiety and embarrassment. Social anxiety and embarrassment were mentioned at least twice during both the individual interviews and focus group interview in various forms. Normally this anxiety is created in the presence of classmates and teachers, but it did create long-term visible resilience to the comments and treatment from others. The responses and dialogue of the participants related to the topic made it another reoccurring theme.

**Low self-esteem.** During data analysis, the first subtheme to emerge from the major theme of social anxiety and embarrassment was low self-esteem. During the focus group discussion, several participants admitted they did not like reading aloud in front of class for fear of "messing up." However, no one said they would not read when called upon due to further embarrassment. Only two participants enjoyed reading for the teacher and class: one is the son of educators and the other was confident and boasted about his Lexile level during the individual interview. For another participant, the lack of interest in reading began as early as kindergarten when he felt embarrassed by the teacher because of his inability to pronounce the word *the*, leading to increased absences in her class. Others shared similar stories—all during the

individual interview—of experiences that deterred their interest in reading in grades ranging from Kindergarten to as recently as the previous year. Two students mentioned third grade, one indicated fourth grade, three students said fifth grade, and the remaining participants stated that middle school was when interest in reading was lost. Three students felt as if they had a reading impairment and stuttering problem that led to their lack of wanting to read aloud. Two participants admitted during the individual interview to having low self-esteem related to the embarrassment they faced in class; however, another admitted he started reading more on his own the previous year and now feels better about reading aloud. Paul presented his mother as the reason he disliked reading because she forced him to read in middle school. The feelings of anxiety created with the experience are evidently long-lasting as he continues to struggle in reading years later. Conversely, Mario shared a different experience in saying he “felt like I’ve accomplished something ‘cause my mom taught me how to read.”

A member of the focus group explained how his phone and games were taken and he did not “have anything to do, so [he] just read *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*.” Similarly, Terrence revealed his ELA teacher made him read a book about cars “just yesterday” and he liked it so he finished it. While various participants were redirected to read in varying fashions, it was clear that not being able to read fluently impacted their anxiety and level of social acceptance.

**Public attitude and stereotypes.** During data analysis, the second subtheme to emerge from the major theme of social anxiety and embarrassment was about public attitude and stereotypes. When asked what stereotypes they thought existed about their age group and race, responses such as, “they think we can’t read” and “they say we don’t read” were the prevailing responses from 10 of the 12 participants. However, the feelings offered in regard to those stereotypes were also similar. Carenzo offered that people should not judge a book by its cover.

Paul responded how people did not know him enough to judge him, and Mark simply stated, “Prove them wrong.” Xavier made the connection between stereotypical behaviors and athletes and discussed how attitudes of thinking they were “dumb” are changing due to the requirement or maintaining good grades in order to play sports. Outwardly, there appeared to be no presence of diminished self-esteem. There was no evidence of feelings of self being adversely affected by what was considered to be the general public opinion about African American adolescents.

### **Major Theme 3: Lack of Knowledge of Reading Level**

The third major theme to emerge during data analysis was the lack of knowledge participants had of their reading level. While the consent letter specifically detailed the research was based on males who were considered struggling readers, most participants did not consider themselves to be struggling readers.

**Confidence in reading ability.** During data analysis, the first subtheme to emerge from the major theme of lack of knowledge of reading level was about confidence in reading ability. Only one participant, Xavier, used the word *Lexile* throughout the research study and while his Lexile level was higher than the majority of the research group (991), it was still ranked at an eighth grade reading level for this 10th grade student. The highest Lexile score (1013) was held by Keontae, although he was not aware of it. His sense of resolution led him to complete all reflective journaling without being prompted to do so, yet he still expressed a dislike for reading traditional books:

I know how smart I am. So, it’s like, if my reading level is not on point, it’s like because I didn’t understand what they put on paper, but I know in my mind I can read and I understand stuff.

Conversely, Terrence, the participant with the lowest Lexile score (270), is an avid gamer and considers the dialogue between himself and other gamers as creditable reading. To him, reading is reading. He spends a large amount of time and money playing interactive video games. He believes he reads “24/7” because the bulk of his time is spent playing video games. When asked how much time he thinks he spends reading in a day, he justified his “24/7” response, stating, “I be on the game. They be having little words, and I be reading them while I’m waiting on somebody.” This concept of what defines reading is explored in a separate theme.

Unfortunately, Terrence did not respond to the added reflective journal question asking whether participants knew their reading level.

Both the individual interviews and the focus group interview offered insight into the experiences and attitudes that may have shaped participants’ thinking in regard to confidence. Again, most participants questioned the relevance of state standardized testing and argued it was not a true measurement of their academic ability. Only Khalil and Keontae enjoyed reading aloud in class or “popcorn” reading. During the focus group discussion, another participant, Mario, again admitted he stuttered and did not like reading out loud in front of the class. Several remaining participants jokingly agreed he had a stuttering problem. He was very comfortable admitting it in the presence of his peers and showed no signs of embarrassment verbally or in body language. Conversely, Xavier, who was most confident in his reading skills during the individual interview, was very reserved during the focus group discussion. He did participate in the discussion but was far more reserved in responding from the level of participation offered during the individual interviews. His closed body language and failure to fully engage in the discussion circle suggested he was not altogether comfortable with this peer group. In observing him, responses to both the research question and the subquestions were visible. Xavier’s level of

confidence seemed to diminish in the presence of the other participants. He had an otherwise positive view of self and was very confident in his own abilities. He admitted to having a family that emphasized the importance of school and reading and owning his own bookshelf at home.

During the focus group interview, Khalil was the most confident in his reading ability. He attempted to dominate the conversation several times to the point of redirection for behavior. He questioned, “How can you not know how to read in the 10th grade?” He was the first to mock other participants on topics ranging from stuttering during reading to athletic skills. When asked why he chose to pick on his peers, his response was unapologetic: “Gotta do it to them before they do it to me.” Khalil’s actions and words also addressed the research question in revealing that while he had open confidence in his reading ability and admittedly was supported academically by his parents (both educators), he did feel the need to lash out at others as a method of protecting his image.

**Lack of understanding deficiency.** During data analysis, the second subtheme to emerge from the major theme of lack of knowledge of reading level was a lack of understanding the deficiency. Always highly forthcoming, Careno, whose Lexile score was 766 (fifth grade), stated he did not know his reading level. He was the one participant who most denounced reading with phrases such as, “I don’t read,” “That’s not for me,” and “I never thought reading would be some idea of enjoyable.” As a sophomore quarterback playing for the varsity team, in this group of athletes he was well-respected and very confident: they listened when he spoke and no one directed any jokes toward him. Collectively, they knew of his dislike for reading. He listened to the questions presented in both the individual and focus group interview and responded with direct, concise statements to the questions presented. Despite his words and actions, Careno was one of three participants who expressed an interest in knowing his reading



level through the private reflective journal. He was also the only participant who seemed appreciative for being allowed participate in the study and make him think about his reading. His reflective journal response to Questions 4 and 5 regarding feelings about the interview and purpose of the study were, “That really helped me because I probably would've never been honest to nobody but [sic] my reading habits” and “It’s helpful and maybe I’ll start reading once a day.” His self-awareness seemed to increase through the candid discussion while also revealing his own feelings of self-efficacy.

Conversely, Xavier, the only participant who used the word *Lexile*, was confident there was no deficiency and that he excelled in reading. He had no idea there was any deficiency in his reading level. This lack of knowledge led him to speak more confidently on the topic but did not offer comfort in speaking to others in the focus group interview. The recommending teacher presented him as a talkative student, yet his behavior was altered by the presence of other participants. Regardless, Xavier never discussed any negative interaction or experiences that may have contributed to this behavior other than being an only child.

**Understand the relevance.** During data analysis, the third subtheme to emerge from the major theme of lack of knowledge of reading level was understanding the relevance of the reading material presented. All participants openly understood the relevance and importance of reading. A common phrase used in individual interviews was “Reading is fundamental.” The participants accepted reading as being a requirement for completing assignments in school and several participants said they did not mind reading in class. Four participants credited their ELA teacher for offering help with in-class reading assignments. A reoccurring code was the necessity of being able to read contracts and football plays. When asked the purpose of reading, several participants responded with statements related to increasing vocabulary and “sounding

smart.” Again, Khalil questioned, “How can you not read in the 10th grade?” Reading on grade level was not mentioned by any participants other than Xavier. Several spoke about the daily requirements to read in the world around them; however, there was no emphasis placed on the importance or relevance of being able to read on grade level.

#### **Major Theme 4: Alternate Forms of Reading**

The fourth major theme to emerge during data analysis reflected the idea of what constitutes reading. Participants expressed their personal definitions of what is considered reading. This theme addresses Research Subquestion 2 as it relates to attitudes toward reading.

**What is considered reading material.** During data analysis, the first subtheme to emerge from the fourth major theme of alternate forms of reading was what is considered reading material. Most participants considered themselves as someone who reads the vast majority of their school day. Reading was not defined as being limited to a novel, short story, or passage, but to anytime words were available to be read. Terrence, the avid gamer, responded he read “24/7” when asked how many hours were spent reading, but decreased his time to five minutes when the dedication to social media was subtracted. Unlike others, he did not attribute time reading during the school day to reading, but perhaps understood the question to refer to voluntary reading without being prompted. Other participants felt strongly that the vast majority of their school day was spent reading in all classes. Most opinions were affirmative and unwavering when asked if they did large amounts of reading in school. Khalil considered his parental consent letter for the study as tangible evidence of reading, although he admitted to not having read the letter in its entirety and verified his mother just skimmed it and signed it as well. To the participants, all words were considered reading. During the focus group interviews, the topic of reading the lyrics of songs and raps was presented by a participant after the researcher

corrected the title of a novel as being collection of poetry by the rapper Tupac Shakur. Several immediately became excited about the conversation and offered the names of No Cap and Rylo Rodriguez as being artists who use “a whole lot of metaphors and similes” and offering music that “makes you think.” “You got to catch it and when you catch it, you be like ‘oh crap!’” “If I like a song, I’m gonna make sure I know the whole song.” Two participants offered and later explained the lyrics of a rap song to the group as an example of how it was thought-provoking. The energy level became more heightened during this part of the discussion and there was an air of satisfaction for having taught something new to others, particularly by Khalil. These comments made during the focus group offered insight into the participants’ willingness, ability, and desire to read, comprehend, and analyze a text. It also addressed their level of confidence in reading in response to Research Subquestions 1 and 2.

Keontae and Justin both expressed an interest in reading comic books during their individual interviews and again during the focus group. This attitude toward reading more visual texts was more positive than that seen in discussed required reading. They enjoy the action of the text and the illustrations that accompany them. Equally important was Terrence’s association of reading while gaming. Reading the instructions during the game while conversing with other gamers online was considered reading to him, and although the Lexile or level of complexity was neither monitored nor gauged in the scenario, he argued it was still reading. Therefore, reading is not limited to books.

**Daily reading practices.** During data analysis, the second subtheme to emerge from the major theme of lack of knowledge of reading level was their daily reading practices and routines. Another nontraditional method of reading was social media and the Internet. All participants considered the time spent reading via social media and gaming was considered true reading. In

this way, they considered themselves as reading all day due to how frequently they read text messages, Instagram, or sports articles on the Internet. When asked if reading on mobile devices presented strain on their eyes, the response was no. Ironically, during another theme to be discussed later, participants pointed out the lack of availability of books due to technology as another barrier to reading. Additionally, during the focus group, several participants agreed there was a change in reading habits after receiving their smart phones. After being asked of things that prevent leisurely reading or what motivates one to read, the response was, “My phone. Grades.” In their own words, the same device that deters them from reading books is the same device they consider be a source of reading. This suggests a lack of understanding or ambiguity in what role social media and the Internet play in contributing to reading habits. Justin, Xavier, and Khalil all specifically stated that “reading is fundamental,” but did not distinguish any apparent differences between leisurely reading and everyday reading. This information offers insight into the research question centered on the lived experiences of the participants. Technology has become the new preferred medium of reading for this research group.

### **Major Theme 5: Barriers to Reading**

The fifth major theme to emerge from that data analysis was barriers in accessing reading. Several participants also either implied or explicitly stated the lack of available books. While Paul reported having “four or five” books in his room during the individual interview, the idea of going to the library was laughable during the focus group. Carenzo stated, “It’s not like, books flowing around here that we want to read.” This comment may have been inspired by the decreasing number of tangible books available as both school and public libraries move to more electronic-based reading. Two participants, Justin and Xavier, who have the second and third highest Lexile scores of the group (990 and 991, respectively) grew up in homes where their

mothers emphasized reading and read to them as children. Xavier was proud when detailing how he had a bookcase at his house and “was brought up on reading. [He] went to the library and bought a couple books. And book fairs, I was always there. But [he] kinda fell off.” In the same light, one participant lost his interest in reading early because his mother forced him to read too often and it became a source of contention. With the exception of Paul and Xavier, no other participants mentioned having books in their childhood homes. The strongest reading recollection for all students were those held from grammar school when books were most often read to them. Therefore, based on the reported experiences of the participants and publicly known information, there appears to be a lack of resources and exposure to hard copies of reading material available to this group of individuals.

**Lack of exposure to reading opportunities.** During data analysis, the first subtheme to emerge from the major theme of barriers to reading was a lack of exposure to reading opportunities. Several participants referred to a lack of exposure to reading opportunities in some capacity as being a barrier to reading more often. During the focus group interview discussion, at least three participants suggested they were not welcome in the library based on the media specialists’ perceived attitude toward them in saying, “First of all, can’t nobody go to the library . . . that ain’t gonna turn out good.” Carenzo stated there were “no books in the library anymore” while another participant offered “it’s not like there’s books flowing around here that we want to read.” This could be, in part, due to the relatively new initiative of the county to move to a more digital learning platform which has also eliminated available computers in the library because students receive personal laptop devices. Additionally, when asked about using materials from the public library, the athletes noted how the hours of the

public library conflicted with their practice time for sports, while the nonathletes did not respond to this probing question.

**Time factor.** During data analysis, the first subtheme to emerge from the major theme of barriers to reading was the time factor. Again, most participants were athletes and they noted the limited amount of time they have to complete homework assignments after practice or a game. According to Khalil, after returning home, he has plans to complete his homework, but after showering and eating dinner, he simply falls asleep. Other participants offered corroborating comments and gestures. They then continued the discussion, pointing out how they sometimes wake up early in the morning to complete homework and how a teammate wakes up at 2 a.m. to do his homework. I then inquired as to whether or not there was study hall provided by the coaches and most agreed there was, while some did not seem to know anything about it.

Another comment related to the theme of time barriers was based on incarceration and subsequently, phones. During the focus group interview, Keontae noted how, “people say when they go to jail, they start reading more, but now people not reading no more because they getting phones in jail.” Other participants jokingly agreed, and Terrence commented, “It’s like punishment to me, locked in a room with nothing to do . . . like I got locked in a cave.” Likewise, Carenzo chimed in with, “like the judge just told me 25 to life.” Ironically, the cell phones are also noted as a barrier for those not incarcerated as well. The barrier then, is the time required for sustained reading.

The access to more interesting information and social media night and day through use of the smartphone also impacts reading. Khalil described how teachers in early grades bribed students into reading by allowing them to watch the movie afterwards, so they would, “go ahead and read the book . . . get it over with so we can watch the movie.” However, all participants

smiled and laughed after Terrence introduced the topic of the phone: “Now you go to middle school. Here comes the peer pressure and the phone.” Keontae interjected with how “the whole environment changed.” They discussed how the phone was used to keep track of sports and other things of interest on social media, particularly Instagram. The phone became a distraction that consumed a large amount of their free time to contribute to the reading barrier.

**Familial influence.** During data analysis, the third subtheme to emerge from the major theme of barriers to reading material was familial influence. The influence of family and early intervention can also be seen as a possible barrier contributing to Theme 5. Several participants noted how family members, particularly their mothers, strongly encouraged them to read as children. Xavier, an only child who is proud of his supposed reading ability, was the only participant to discuss having a bookcase in his room, but during individual interviews, several participants discussed how their mothers read them bedtime stories and encouraged them to do well in reading in school. Mark frequently mentioned having an uncle who also encouraged him to do well in school and frequently checked on his grades, but seemingly was not actively involved in his education. Regardless, Mark referenced his uncle several times throughout the interview in a proud manner. All participants said there was someone in their life who encouraged them to read, but only two mentioned having access to actual books and one whose mother literally forced him to read to the point of resentment. His argument was that he was still expected to read and pronounce words with which he was unfamiliar, and he simply could not do it.

Keontae, the outlier with the highest reading score, described growing up in a neighborhood where he would sometimes hear gunshots at night, explained how his mother

taught him the importance of knowing how to read and learning sight words in school. He also remembers reading at an early age:

When I used to do it, I only used to read stuff that interested me, like comedians or football and sports. I used to have to read it. I liked to read it, but now I don't find interest in reading.

Therefore, despite having lived in a troubled area, he has a strong foundation in reading but now lacks the interest.

### **Major Theme 6: Required Reading**

The sixth major theme to emerge during data analysis was required reading. Participants understood the necessity of reading in accomplishing a task or as a daily occurrence and discussed why reading, for them, should be purposeful.

**Academic reading requirement.** During data analysis, the first subtheme to emerge from the major theme of required reading was academic reading requirements. Nine of the 12 participants in this research were athletes. Several participants indicated they would receive an incentive of extra credit from their ELA teacher for their participation in completing the interview, focus group, and reflective journaling. These circumstances offered another theme for the research: the influence of sports on reading. This theme emerged in both individual interviews and focus group discussions. Participants became visually excited when recalling books they read about sports. Mario, Keontae, and Derrick all began discussing a magazine frequently offering sports teams highlights, player statistics, and team standings called *Score*. This also was a part of the discussion when non-athletes seemed to retreat and become withdrawn due to their lack of knowledge. Interestingly, Xavier, who boasted of his reading ability and who was also an athlete, was particularly quiet as the other, seemingly more popular,



athletes spoke. Nevertheless, the participants seemed to have absolutely no issue with reading materials related to sports. They began speaking with jargon I did not understand as the researcher and thereby demonstrated a capacity to learn things relative to their interests.

**Sports reading requirement.** Finally, during data analysis, the second subtheme to emerge from the major theme of required reading was the sports reading requirement. Not only did the participants enjoy reading about sports information, they also read in order to be eligible to play sports. During their individual interviews, four participants stated it was important to be able to read so they “wouldn’t be cheated in their contract” and so they would be able to read the plays in the playbook. Beyond having the ability to read plays, several participants found little relevance in completing reading assignments. Ever vocal, Carenzo offered, “If I didn’t have to have good grades to play sports . . . I wouldn’t read at all ‘cause that’s useless. I don’t think nobody would.” Even more participants indicated in some capacity how making good grades was a requirement to play sports, and that reading was a part of making good grades. As previously mentioned, no participants expressed any concern with reading for class. Carenzo even stated, “It’s just something you gotta do.”

The requirement to do well in class in order to maintain eligibility also presented an underlying theme of cheating. And while the discussion was too brief to create a well-developed theme, a member of the focus group responded to the question of what would happen with schoolwork after going to college: “They got people, that could help you . . . and can do your work for you. There’s apps and stuff that could write papers for you . . . I feel like I’m just gonna be paying people.” Comments such as these emphasize a lack of understanding not only regarding the importance of reading, but also the purpose of understanding what is being read.

Unfortunately, aspects of this topic were dominated by the athlete participants and there was little input on the matter from the two non-athlete participants in the room.

When answering the individual interview question about stereotypical attitudes toward African Americans and reading, Justin mentioned how athletes are viewed as the “dumb jocks” because they are more motivated to do well because of sports. While this could be the case for many athletes, the requirement to pass courses to be eligible to play may have taught student athletes to find other creative ways to improve their grades.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions for the study addressed the gap that existed in the literature as it related to the lived experiences of 10th-grade African American male struggling readers. The central research question was focused on the lived experiences of African American male students and was answered more specifically through the subquestions. The subquestions were based on the social constructivism theory as it relates to how individuals adapt to their social surroundings and environment. Although boredom was described by the participants as the main point of contention as it relates to reading, they also discussed several other contributing factors affecting their lack of interest in reading. The following section includes descriptions of participant responses that answered the central and subquestions of the study.

#### **Central Research Question**

The central research question was, “What are the lived experiences of 10th-grade African American male students who are struggling readers in the metro-Atlanta area?” The central question was asked to determine how the participants’ lived experiences both in and out of school may have impacted their reading struggles. Overwhelmingly, all participants understood the necessity of reading and how it is important in life both during and after high school. The

actual lived experiences of those participants, however, were very diverse. The participants came from a combination of single-parent homes, co-parent homes, and extended family homes. A few participants described living in loud or sometimes unsafe neighborhoods, while others described their neighborhoods as being quiet. Academically, several participants recollected their mothers reading to them when they were very young children and several more could identify family members or teachers who encouraged their reading at a very young age. The answer to this question is multifaceted, and the data analysis revealed six themes: boredom, social anxiety, knowledge, alternate forms of reading, barriers to reading, and required reading.

No two participants shared the exact same experience. Their situations varied widely. The inner city or metropolitan stigma that was originally thought to be a learning barrier sometimes proved to be motivation. No one appeared to take pride in constantly moving, living in “loud” neighborhoods where there were “sometimes shootouts at night,” or living in an apartment instead of a house, as various participants noted. Some participants were from single-parent homes, others lived with both parents, and one lived with two parents and a grandmother whom he deeply respected. With the exception of the one outlier, one thing they all seemed to have in common as it relates to their upbringing was a lack of access to books. Some were read to by their mothers or encouraged to read by family members, while others were forced to read and seemingly lacked direction with the reading process. During their current adolescent years, all participants expressed a lack of interest and relevance in their reading material. If there was not a situation that necessitated the need to read, they simply did not do it. However, when introduced to reading material that was relevant or interesting, such as sports, murder mysteries, and books based on cars, they read with enthusiasm.

One noteworthy theme that emerged during this research was the lack of knowledge of what their reading levels were. No one considered himself a poor reader despite the rationale stated in the consent letter. Yet it has been confirmed as believed, this target group thrives on competition and peer acceptance. They rebuffed the idea of stereotypical attitudes toward them because they think those stereotypes are untrue. I question what might happen if this group were empowered with an understanding of where they rank academically and how they can be challenged to improve. It would also be interesting to speak with more individuals who are not athletes to corroborate the competitive motivation of the entire group. The mentors and influencers in the lives of the participants was also relevant to their experiences. Several spoke highly of their mothers and how their mothers encouraged them at young ages to read; however, beyond their formative years, the ELA teachers and coaches were the primary facilitators and motivators to read.

At the close of the focus group students unanimously chimed in as to how they understood the necessity of reading, but there was no indication of an understanding of the importance of increasing their reading ability levels. To this group, reading is something that must be done in order to live in society. There was little interest or emphasis placed on reading for personal enrichment. The lived experiences of these participants did not place very much emphasis on the concept of leisurely reading over reading in order to explore potential career options. They would like for their reading material to be for practical, everyday use.

### **Subquestion 1 (SQ1)**

SQ1 was, “How do 10th-grade African American male students who are struggling readers describe their attitudes toward reading?” The research subquestions were also grounded in the gap that exists in learning of the experiences of the target group in real-time with an

absence of data-based assumptions. These were current, relevant responses from high school adolescent African American males who will legally have the option to discontinue school enrollment within one academic year. With the exception of two participants, Derrick and Xavier, all expressed a strong dislike for reading. Based on their responses, the dislike is rooted in the content and subject matter, more so than in the actual process of reading. This is how the emergence of the theme of boredom evolved. All participants emphatically expressed high levels of dissatisfaction with the selection of books presented to them and the relevance of the material to their personal lives. The subtheme of low interest levels and unrelatable content of currently assigned material was a result of reoccurring codes such as a preference to read nonfiction, sports, action, or horror. Regarding the nonfiction text, the participants also discussed being more concerned with learning about the experiences of successful people or how to create careers or become financially sound after high school. Other responses related to the theme of boredom included how elementary teachers provided extrinsic motivation to read in the form of viewing a movie after completing the novel or engaging in classroom competitions, namely Kahoots, in order to encourage reading. Several participants also confessed to falling asleep while reading homework due to a combination of exhaustion from practice or games or general disinterest. This also allowed the theme of alternate forms of reading to emerge along with the subthemes of what is considered reading material. During the focus group interview, four participants felt they would be more prone to reading more if they were able to select their own book; however, the majority said they still would not choose to read on their own if given self-selection of reading material.

Several participants also offered social media and daily reading occurrences ranging from reading directional signs on the way to school to reading instructions for classwork as being

types of reading. These responses also contributed to the emersion of the theme of alternate forms of reading and the subthemes of what is considered reading and daily reading practices. Terrence, the avid gamer, proffered reading the dialogue between himself and other online gamers as being an adequate form of reading. This is the type of reading to which the participants did not object; however, being forced to read lengthy novels or extended passages about seemingly abstract and unrelatable content was a point of contention, regardless of who initiated or requested the reading to take place. During their individual interviews, Terrence, Mark, and Justin explained how the passage reading, which is normally followed by standards-based questions in preparation for standardized tests, was not something they enjoyed. It was apparent that the students did not recognize the existence or significance of Lexile levels. However, participants did not take issue with reading articles and information about sports, gaming, or cars. Judging by the smiles and laughs when discussing any of these topics, the participants' moods appeared to shift from somber or serious to playful and lighthearted. Even while conducting individual interviews, and certainly during the focus group interviews, the body language became more relaxed and engaging when speaking on these topics of interest.

The central question of the lived experiences of the participants, and the subquestion of the attitudes toward reading are also addressed in their selection of reading material. They expressed a level of intimidation based on the length of books, but admitted if the book was relative or interesting, they would still read the material. The information presented in this discussion created the theme of barriers to reading through the subtheme of lack of exposure to reading opportunities. The participants considered social media as credible reading. Online platforms provide a wealth of information instantaneously. The level of interest found online through constant posts and alerts virtually force them to read, but they also admitted they would

stop reading once they lose interest in the information. Two participants specifically referred to “chapter books” as being “ok” if they were interesting. This is the point during the focus group interview when the participants discussed reading *The Outsiders* and *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and how they were interested in the content. These were the only chapter books, in addition to minimal reading from *Lord of the Flies*, for which there was any ability to recall content or subject matter of reading from elongated texts. Their discussion of books of interest also addressed their barriers to reading as it relates to time and familial influence. Their attitudes toward reading were highly influenced by the spare time they had in their regular school day as well as their teachers’ selection of books and whether there is a lack of familial influence to read at the high-school level. Unlike when Paul and Justin were growing up and being read bedtimes stories by their mothers, there was no mention of reading encouragement in the home in either middle or high school.

The data analysis also revealed how all the participants’ attitudes were shaped by prior and current experiences and not necessarily by living conditions. Students from both single-parent and co-parented homes alike felt the same disdain for reading. In the case of this particular study, participation in sports monopolized a great deal of time for most participants and eliminated the option of several activities, including reading. One of the outliers, Xavier, was once an avid reader, but admitted to “falling off” since entering high school, while another participant was intrinsically motivated to improve his reading and was proud to report he was doing better through his self-motivation. Additionally, the participants expressed a preference for nonfiction over fiction and did not like to analyze the plot and literary elements; they just wanted to read about action and adventure. An interesting point made related to this research subquestion was centered on how this targeted group of African American male students was not

presented with reading material in school that was either interesting to them or relevant to their lives. This point further contributed to the overarching emergent theme of boredom.

Treatment of SQ1 varied between the individual interviews and the focus group interview. During the individual interviews, participants responded to the interview questions in a both open and honest, and calm and direct manner. Conversely, during the focus group interview, a few of the participants' dispositions changed seemingly to meet the expectations of their peers. Khalil was highly critically of the more reserved participants, particularly Eric, when answering questions about reading. Eric was consistent in remaining quiet with brief responses to the few questions he answered, but Khalil's behavior was addressed multiple times in relation to mocking other participants. On the other hand, Mario was consistent—despite the presence of the others—in remarking how reading aloud was embarrassing to him due to a stuttering problem. While several of the participants laughed along with others in mocking the more reserved Eric, with the exception of one or two brief comments, no one felt the need to defend him. This is the same type of peer influence that exemplified the emergence of the social anxiety and embarrassment theme. While Mario was seemingly comfortable, or adjusted, to speaking of this deficiency, other respondents such as Eric were reserved when in the company of others on the topic.

In the reflective journaling follow-up questions, participants were asked if they knew their reading Lexile level. With the exception of Xavier, none of the participants who chose to respond to the question were aware of their reading level. During the individual interviews and the focus group interview, participants stated reading fluently was important, and Khalil even questioned: "How can you not know how to read in the 10th grade?" He, along with Keontae and Carenzo, agreed school was unnecessary after the "fifth or sixth" grade. For the most part,



those who responded to the question or participated in the conversation were comfortable with their knowledge of their reading level. Thus, the theme of lack of knowledge of reading level emerged. This group of young men expressed an interest in competitive learning platforms, such as Kahoots, and being so begs the question of how might their attitudes toward becoming more proficient readers change if they actually knew their reading level? Some may argue that informing students of their reading level could lower their expectations or become a self-fulfilling prophecy, while others could offer the knowledge of the reading level to be leverage and momentum for change in a positive direction.

### **Subquestion 2 (SQ2)**

SQ2 was, “How do 10th-grade African American male students who are struggling readers perceive that reading challenges impact their views of self?” The answer to this question was varied for several participants and the emergence of the subthemes of low self-esteem and public attitudes and stereotypes combined to create the theme of social anxiety. While all agreed the stereotypical attitude about African American males and their reading habits was negative, their responses as to how that made them feel differed. Many discussed how the stereotype did not refer to them and people make unjust judgements against them, but at least three—Mario, Mark, and Justin—admitted to having low self-esteem due to “things that happened” to them relative to classroom experiences. I offered a soft probe in asking what happened, but Justin’s body language became uncomfortable as he offered an awkwardly pleading smile that suggested he did not want to share. I did not continue to probe; however, Mark openly explained how an incident in elementary school had deterred him from reading aloud. His teacher openly chastised him for not being able to pronounce the word *the* and he was embarrassed enough to skip her class until his mother had his schedule changed. He liked his new teacher but was still reluctant

to read aloud in class. Other participants told similar stories of grammar school moments when they were told to read without assistance and were consequently embarrassed. Mark also stutters but is now able to openly admit that while he does not stutter as much as he did in previous years, it is still a problem for him. This was stated in both the individual and focus group interview sessions and he even laughed along with a few participants about the issue. Overall, all agreed reading was a necessary and required skill and several felt it increased vocabulary levels and “made you sound smart.”

As it directly answers SQ2, there was no readily apparent connection, though, between the participants’ views of self and the actual act of reading despite the situations in which students were embarrassed in class or lacking public speaking and reading skills. They understood the need to do well in school but clung to the idea of seeing reading as the means to obtaining a diploma or degree instead of gaining knowledge and increased levels of reading proficiency that could be used in college or career paths. No one discussed a desire to improve his socioeconomic situation and how reading could help in accomplishing goals; however, in their defense, there were no questions asked about future aspirations.

While it is unclear whether the interview questions did not adequately approach the topic of view of self or if the students are sincere or maybe protected in openly discussing the topic, there was little evidence of reading challenges either negatively or positively impacting views of self for the participants. Data analysis from the individual interview, focus group interview, and reflective journaling did not yield any emergent themes and the data produced can only partially be ascribed to the theme of lack of knowledge or reading level. Again, no participants were entirely sure of their reading level, and the one person, Xavier, who was insistent his was high, was incorrect in thinking so. The participants openly rebuffed stereotypes suggesting their peer

group or race is less intelligent than others and does not read or read well; however, they openly admitted to not enjoying reading or reading in their free time. According to the focus group discussion, people should read for practical, required purposes, and the insinuation is that the reading proficiency level is inconsequential.

### **Summary**

Chapter Four included detailed descriptions of the study participants and the themes that emerged through data analysis from the individual interviews, a focus group interview, and the reflective journals completed by the participants. There was a total of 12 participants who all met the criteria for the study as being 10th-grade African American males who struggle with reading. There was one participant who did not meet the initial requirement, but his responses and contributions did not adversely affect the overall data. The focus of the study was based on a central research question and two research subquestions which were answered through summarized comments and direct quotes throughout the individual interviews, focus group interview, and reflective journal entries. The chapter concluded with the response to the central research question and the research subquestions.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of 10th-grade African American male students who are struggling readers in the metro-Atlanta area. The following section includes a summary of the study's findings. A review and analysis of the answers to the primary research question and the research subquestions is discussed along with the theoretical and empirical foundations from the review of literature. Each section is explained in detail. The delimitations are discussed, followed by recommendations for future research. Finally, this chapter concludes with a summary of the conclusions drawn from the study.

### **Summary of Findings**

This study included a triangulation of three different types of data sources: individual interviews, focus group interview, and reflective journaling. Each type of data were used to generate codes and a thematic understanding of the experiences that potential contribute to the reading struggles faced by this target group of African American males. The bulk of data and information collected was synthesized from both the individual interviews and the focus group interview, while the reflective journaling served only to corroborate what had been discussed and provide additional input. Over the course of one school day, the individual interviews and the focus group interview were completed and recorded. Within the following week, the information was transcribed and the information from the reflective journals was read and reviewed. Post-It notes were used to identify codes and later create themes for the dominant topics. The codes were reduced from the focus group interview first and was later followed by reductionism for the individual interviews. A spreadsheet was created to chart participants,

personal narratives, and responses to questions. The six overarching themes were as follows: boredom, social anxiety, knowledge, alternate forms of reading, barriers, and required reading. The research questions guiding the study were used to determine the lived experiences of the struggling readers who participated in the present study.

### **Central Research Question**

The central research question guiding this study was as follows: What are the lived experiences of 10th-grade African American male students who are struggling readers in the metro-Atlanta area? The purpose of this question was to learn of motivational factors that may have encouraged or stunted the reading growth of students in previous years, leading them to be struggling readers. The question was also aimed to offer students a voice and moment of self-reflection of their attitudes toward reading and its long-term benefits. The interview questions supported the central research question and yielded responses that enabled all research questions to be sufficiently answered.

### **Subquestion 1 (SQ1)**

The first research subquestion was as follows: How do 10th-grade African American male students who are struggling readers describe their attitudes toward reading? The participants were extremely vocal and forthcoming in answering this question and unanimously offered a response indicating a lack of interest in reading selections. The current curriculum does not allow students any autonomy in reading self-selected books as most reading material is geared toward meeting the current standards. While most books can be used to demonstrate mastery of standards, school systems traditionally select reading material that most mimics what could be seen on standardized tests, which is normally not considered to be high interest reading. The participants expressed an interest in reading related to sports, action and adventure, and cars.

**Subquestion 2 (SQ2)**

The second research subquestion was as follows: How do 10th-grade African American male students who are struggling readers perceive that reading challenges impact their views of self? The overwhelming answer to this question was not at all. Participants seemed to have accepted a negative stereotype that African American males either cannot read or do not read, but most rejected the idea as it pertained to them. The initial topic of self-efficacy did not appear to be overtly related to reading ability. The feelings of anxiety and embarrassment over reading were mostly impacted by peer responses and interactions. Most participants were confident in their reading ability, despite not knowing for what level of ability they were rated. The emphasis of being tired of standardized tests and classifying them as “dumb” suggests students do not take the test as seriously as schools would like for them to and, consequently, they score lower than what their actual reading level might be. While they understood the importance of assessments in passing the course, they questioned the relevance of assessments in postsecondary life. Therefore, while only two of 12 participants admitted to having low self-esteem, the relationship of their reading levels as opposed to relationships with teachers and peers is still questionable. Additionally, SQ2 did not address their current feelings of self-efficacy in relation to reading, but only addressed their opinion of reading ability as a whole.

**Discussion**

The findings of this study are closely related to the theoretical and empirical literature presented in Chapter Two. Previous empirical research presented in the literature review detailed contributing factors to reading struggles for African Americans in general. The theoretical foundation for the study was based on Skinner’s (1974) social constructivism along with the operant conditioning and behaviorism theories. One places emphasis on the effect

surroundings and interactions with others, while the latter theories suggest behaviors are altered and affected by various types of stimulus within their environment. Both were relevant in the research for the present study. The data were compared with the existing theories in order to corroborate and validate the appropriateness of the material in describing reading struggles for the target group. The following sections work together to explain how this study is relevant to the empirical and theoretical foundation of information found in the literature review.

### **Empirical Literature**

The literature presented in Chapter Two was consistently verified by the participants of this present student. Skinner's theory of determinism (1974) proved valid as participants modified their behaviors based on the people or elements around them as seen in the variance from the individual interview to the focus group interview. Minor deviations were attributed to the extracurricular habits of the participants, namely sports and gaming. However, sports and gaming, both collectively and independently, supported the cooperative learning style concept as a successful tool in increasing academic achievement (Boykin et al., 2005), as the participants agreed they preferred to play games to learn and review in class. The lack of interest in the reading curriculum was the most predominant point of discussion while the influencers were also noteworthy. Wright's (2003) position of adjusting the curriculum to reflect more diversity and overcome obstacles to offer a type of escapism for youth was also corroborated in the current study. The participants felt largely disconnected with many of the characters and plots presented in school and this deterred leisurely reading. The empirical literature was also supportive of the barriers faced by any student of a low SES as it relates to generally being exposed to books (Ibarro, 2016; Stephens, 2016). The gap in the literature continues to exist as the subjective and lived experiences of the target group are underrepresented and inadequately

addressed. Although the participants resided in inner city or metropolitan areas of Atlanta, gentrification and leadership styles of the school have affected their attitudes toward education. Several participants mentioned how the culture of the school has changed. This could refer to the increased diversity that includes a rising 28% Hispanic population or a zero tolerance for misbehavior implemented by the fairly new principal (“Schools,” 2019). The following section includes explanation of how this study relates to past research and how it fills the existing gap in the literature regarding struggling readers and their lived experiences.

Chapter Two comprised a combination of topics that are either directly or indirectly relevant to the subject of the research study. The categories of topics included reading ability (Brack, 1998), social influences (Gibbs, 2010; Kunjunfu, 2011), effects of misbehavior (U.S. Department of Education, 2012), and self efficacy (Fordam & Ogbu, 1986). The individual interviews and focus group interviews corroborated much of the information presented in Chapter Two. Interestingly, only one participant, Carengo, felt as if suspensions adversely affected reading; however, most participants found no connection between reading proficiency and being suspended from school. However, Carengo recalled an end-of-semester suspension that caused him to fail the 9th grade and he understood the importance of being in school and how it affects overall academic growth. Despite living in a metropolitan area of one of the South’s largest cities, there was no mention of gang violence or influence with the participants involved in this study. This could have been influenced by the majority of participants being athletes for whom coaches often provide mentorship expectations that deter gang-related behavior.

Other empirical literature reflected a learning barrier based on early literacy and parental involvement (Pate & Hamilton, 1992), effectiveness of available reading programs (E. Jensen,



2009), and the importance reading fluency (Nathan & Stanovich, 1991). Several participants discussed the necessity to read fluently but revealed the ability to read without error was more significant than comprehending the content of the literature. The overemphasis on reading fluency has apparently superimposed the need to understand what is being read leading to lower scores on standardized tests. The outlier of the group holding the highest Lexile score, Keontae, did mention learning sight words in Pre-K, but he also discussed building a foundation of reading with his mother as did other members of the group with their parents. Only two participants mentioned having books at home to read. These gaps in reading opportunities are reflective of the literature outlining contemporary circumstances in accessibility to books discussed by Chrastka and Findley (2018). As America focuses on advancements in technology, the transitioning generation is somewhat at a loss in how to maintain literacy development. Additionally, if a now common form of discipline by parents is restricted phone use, but students are using their smartphones to read, then the punishment is twofold if there is a lack of access to tangible reading material. Chrastka and Findley discussed the decreased budgets in public library that led to more encouragement of e-books and other electronic forms of reading.

The stereotypes and historical context and its impact on reading are not readily prevalent to the lived experiences of the participants. Most participants felt no connection between themselves and the stereotypical attitudes toward African American males and reading. Comments such as, “I don’t care,” “I just ignore it,” “It’s not true for everyone,” “It’s weird,” and “Don’t judge a book by its cover” were the most common responses, while only one participant, Khalil, said he felt offended by the stereotypes. While they may not realize it, this could be what DePillis (2018) defined as apathetic behavior in understanding achievement gaps between various ethnic groups. The definition of success for this group was not defined by

grades in school and academic performance levels as much as using intellect for more practical things.

During the focus group interview, several participants stated they did not think school was necessary after the sixth grade. When asked about building a career path, the response was “they got schools for that.” This most likely refers to trade schools and community colleges where individuals can immediately work on a trade or in a field of interest. I then asked the participants about elective courses at school and they could not identify any specific career paths available to them. They were more interested in sports. This passion for athleticism could feed into yet another stereotype of African American males and their athletic ability, or it could reflect attitudes created by the influencers in their lives. Several students noted a parent validated the need to read so they would not be cheated out of athletic contracts. All of the data suggest the potential problem has less to do with being self-motivated to read the current curriculum as a way to overcome reading challenges and more to do with providing extrinsic motivation by offering relevant and interesting literature.

### **Theoretical Literature**

The social determinism and social constructivism of Skinner (1974), combined with his operant conditioning and behaviorism theories also provide the theoretical framework for the current study. One places emphasis on the effect surroundings and interactions with others, while the latter theories offer behaviors are altered and affected by various types of stimulus within their environment. In addition, Bandura’s (1978) social learning theory is also intertwined with Skinner in providing a foundation relevant to the present study. A specific theme related to the theoretical framework was that of social anxiety and embarrassment. The altered actions and behaviors characteristic of behaviorism were evident as the behavior during

the individual interviews was heavily shifted during the focus group interview. Participants who were once actively engaged in the one-on-one interviews became more reserved in large groups of their peers. Khalil, the athlete participant who held the second lowest Lexile score (595), dominated the conversation and defended his antagonist behavior toward others as, “I have to say something to them before they get me.” This was a stark contrast to the mannerly behavior offered during the one-on-one interview. Meanwhile, Justin, the non-athlete participant with the third highest Lexile score (990) offered little contribution to the focus group discussion. As yet another example of altered behavior was an athlete participant, Eric, who offered very short, mumbled responses to all questions during the individual interview and said he was not interested in attending the focus group interview. However, with the encouragement of his peers, Eric decided to return for the focus group session, but he still offered no input. Eric was also the target of jokes and playful insults by other athletes in the room and offered very few rebuttals to their comments. As it relates to operant conditioning, the non-athletes seemed very much accustomed to allowing the ball players to dominate the discussion and the room. The outlier with the highest Lexile score (1013), Keontae, was also an athlete, but his disposition remained consistent with that seen in the individual interview. He modestly smiled at a few of the comments made by Khalil and Mario directed to the others but refrained from negative comments himself. In witnessing the behavior with this research group, the foundational theories were thoroughly supported and corroborated.

### **Implications**

Reading struggles are becoming of increasing concern as the school curriculum become more aggressive and the existing achievement gap between socioeconomic classes and ethnicities continue to grow. Previous research has not afforded those performing at the lowest

end of the academic spectrum an opportunity to share their lived experiences and interests that could directly impact their reading habits. This qualitative study served as an attempt to fill that gap by adding to the existing literature and offering qualitative exposure to an otherwise quantitative research-based topic. There are theoretical, empirical, and practical implications for this research study conducted to discover how the lived experiences of struggling adolescent African American males impact their reading performance.

### **Theoretical Implications**

Being a struggling reader and an ethnic minority, particularly an African American male, offers several implications supported by a wide variety of theories stemming from Skinner (1974) and Vygotsky's (1978) behaviorism and social constructivism theories. Why the gap has steadily widened for this one social group while it closes for other ethnic minority groups is a quandary that seems to be multifaceted with several layers of potential justifications. Most of the participants were encouraged to read by parents or family members early in life and later encouraged by teachers and coaches; however, they are neither provided with the resources or time necessary to learn to read for personal enrichment leading to better performance in curriculum-based reading. The research suggests the stimulus referenced by Skinner (1974) needs to be modified in order to generate more positive attitudes toward reading. Students will have to have higher levels of exposure to books at an early age and there somehow needs to be a balance of energy exerted between sports, gaming or other social behavior and academics. While the stereotype is widely understood, the participants do not recognize how they contribute to the negative perception by not taking an interest in their reading levels or seeking reading opportunities outside of the classroom. They understand the necessity of reading for their

postsecondary aspirations, but do not take ownership of comprehending and interpreting the importance of information presented to them.

The school system also has shared ownership in the reading struggles faced by its students. The generic curriculum spread across all demographics and socioeconomic groups is not proving to be beneficial. Students who are exposed to reading more frequently at home are at an obvious advantage upon entering school, but parents, school systems, and the school community should possibly implement more diverse practices that empower the children they service and offer more exposure to the subjects of interest to the students. Another point of contention that was more thoroughly developed in this research study is that of access to technology. Many parents may feel as if providing their children with smartphones allows them to remain in contact with them and assists students with some school assignments as well as being helpful in other ways. However, the focus group interview revealed how technology, specifically personal phones, has interrupted learning and social behaviors. The participants admitted they avoid social media-based conflicts “unlike the girls” and use their phones for Instagram or to read sports statistics. They also alluded to the pressures and changes faced upon entering high school. While this study focused primarily on reading habits, social influences are also an interesting point of discussion; it would be interesting to learn of the specific challenges faced by the target group in their transition from elementary to middle and from middle to high school.

Another factor affecting reading readiness is that of time. The participants noted how plans to complete school assignments after practice were thwarted by fatigue. One football player told of how a teammate set an alarm to complete schoolwork at 2 a.m. Other athletes mentioned falling asleep at the dinner table or “passing out” after showering from practice.

Some school systems have implemented mandatory study halls, but coaches, administrators, and teachers will need to work together to enforce this. The current social constructs place sports as a top priority in schools. While this is helpful in encouraging students to maintain passing grades, it is detrimental if it does not teach students how to live a balanced life.

### **Empirical Implications**

The majority of retention literature available about African American males centers around a lack of mentors, learning deficits, and disciplinary issues. Additionally, much of the information in extant literature is presented from the perspective of adult males or college professors researching the phenomenon. The present study offered a fresh, transparent, and honest perspective from the actual targeted group. Despite time concerns combined with challenges faced in receiving the necessary consents to work with minors, I could not change the participants of the research. Their voices are relevant and need to be heard. I do believe participation in the individual interview and focus group interviews caused the participants to think. The most vocal anti-reader of the group, Carengo, said he will consider reading something at least once a day after being asked about his feelings regarding participating in the research. The empirical events are largely based on theories and quantitative analysis of data in conjunction with sometimes biased personal experiences. This real-time, targeted audience format allows us to hear the lived experiences and personal feelings of participants old enough and articulate enough to state their positions and offer fresh, sincere information.

Fulton County is the fourth largest school district in the state of Georgia. It combines with Atlanta Public Schools to serve the bulk of inner-city schools in the metropolitan Atlanta area. The participants interviewed for this study represented potentially thousands of other students with similar backgrounds and SES. The empirical implications for future research are

highly relevant to the growing population in this area. At present, students are matriculating through a school system in the same city where they may easily find themselves unemployable. They will pay taxes and contribute to a local school system that ignores the interest and experiences of its population while attempting to streamline their curriculum with other school systems, varying demographics, and contrasting socioeconomic situations. This is not only unfair, but it is unreasonable. More research-based efforts should be made to directing the future of students so they can live and work in their own communities. While many schools have implemented work-based learning and created career paths for their students, special research should be targeted to earlier interventions for struggling students in order to change the stereotypical behaviors, lowered expectations, and self-fulfilling prophecies that order the steps of our youth. While parent centers exist in most Title I schools serving financially challenged communities, more information is needed as to how parents approach student learning and set expectations for their children. It is apparent through this research the expectation is there, but children need more than encouraging words and direct commands in order to carry out a task. As revealed in the emergence of themes, parents and students need more access to better resources. Information related to the effectiveness of public library hours and available resources and how it affects student achievement is another area of concern involving resources. There are several areas for more in-depth answers to questions and situations related to this research.

### **Practical Implications**

Finally, the study provided practical implications for the participants as well as the stakeholders of the school community. Students' voices are valid. Their interests are important and they should be informed participants in the planning of their futures. The competitive nature

alone of these adolescents should provide motivation for keeping them informed of their performance levels. They should also be equipped with the resources and tools to improve their reading comprehension skills through any subject matter they deem interesting. Too often educators are told to differentiate learning for all students but test all students the same way. For this reason, many teachers chose to introduce students to materials that will most likely be seen on standardized tests. The problem with this is two-fold: the content is rarely interesting, and the lack of interest leads to disengaged reading and low performance on tests. If it is truly the skill tests seek to assess, we must question why the passages are uninspired and lengthy. Most tests are administered in an online platform, so why can the students not select the genre in which they are interested? Doing so could possibly reflect more accuracy in assessing reading levels and reading comprehension.

More practical implications could involve cultural sensitivity. It is the culture of this group to find acceptance in their peer group and from their teachers. Embarrassing moments or deprecating behaviors can have a long-lasting impact on their attitudes toward learning and education. Each participant could readily identify the grade when their learning was stifled. And unlike the fourth grade syndrome, empirical data reflects as the turning point in education, the moments of resentment and disdain for this group were wide-ranging. Fortunately, at least two participants were able to rejuvenate their interest in reading as recently as the day prior to the interviews. More practical implications would include finding ways to re-engage reluctant or struggling students to reading materials of substance.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

Several decisions made by the researcher, school system, and classroom teachers resulted in guidelines and delimitations for this study. While the process was carried out somewhat



seamlessly once all permissions were approved and granted, there were certain factors that affected the results of the study. The design chosen for this study was a phenomenological research design. This design was most fitting as it allowed me to interview a group of 12 participants through personal, individual interviews, a focus group interview, and a private reflective journal. In using these methodologies, participant responses were verified through a textual data collection format where the responses were analyzed for the naturally emerging themes. By using all three methods of data collection at the same site within a very limited time frame, I was able to obtain multiple perspectives, experiences, and visual feedback in a timely fashion and without losing very much of any participant's interest.

Another delimitation was the location. While a few participants had only attended the high school for 1 or 2 years, most shared the same ELA class and had some level of comfort in speaking together in a large group. Additionally, many played on the same sports team or were familiar with other athletes in the room by way of other classes taken simultaneously. This made the focus group interview more organic as the participants were more open and authentic. While the location provided an important delimitation, so did the actual peer group.

The age, gender, and ethnicity of the group was essentially the same, which also contributed to the level of comfort that allowed the focus group to be a success. Visually, the students had much in common and questions related to race and gender were neither isolating nor embarrassing. While most participants were athletes, and this created a type of comradery during the focus group interview, it also created a barrier for non-athletes and those not considered first-string.

In every study there are limitations, and this study was not exempt. Participant selection greatly impacted the data produced in the study. While the targeted group was similar in several

aspects (age, gender, ethnicity), the volunteer efforts of the cooperating classroom teacher yielded more athletes than not. Of the 12 participants, 10 played either varsity football or varsity basketball and much of their focus was on sports. A more balanced selection of participants could have resulted in different outcomes regarding the motivation for reading and the types of supplemental reading selections they might prefer. Additionally, the age group and grade level was specifically chosen because the 10th grade is last year students are legally required to attend school. It would have been interesting to interview individuals not motivated by athletics to participate in the study in order to learn of the experiences that may have affected their reading interest and ability. The voluntary nature of the study, the level of difficulty in soliciting participants, and the level of complexity in securing permission to participate, combined to create a certain level of difficulty in creating a true varied sample of participants.

A final delimitation of the study was my level of familiarity in working with this participant group. As a high school teacher of 20 years, I have developed interpersonal skills that greatly assisted in conducting both the individual and group discussion with the participants who became emotional, excited, or unruly. At the onset of each individual interview, most became more comfortable after I offered a brief background of myself as being a local high school teacher. Some asked about students they thought I might know, which was an example of their increased level of comfort.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Ethnic minority academic struggles in reading as well as other disciplines is a growing concern in education and the educational community that will continue to warrant study until a movement is made in the right direction. Reading has been impacted early and on several different levels for these students. Standards-based education and district-wide focus lessons

have created more streamlined approaches to education but have largely eliminated teacher autonomy and flexibility in teaching. Teachers following a scripted curriculum are not able or do not have the resources available to offer reading selections that might interest their students. The result is students who are increasingly more disconnected and disengaged with reading. These situations combine to create the dominant theme of boredom. As this was the most significant theme in this study, future researchers might research the probability of integrating a standards-based approach to teaching using high-interest materials or research how effective the new curriculum design truly is with all factors considered.

Also, there should be more studies focused on underlying issues such as teacher attitudes toward standards-based education, the level of effectiveness of project-based learning within the school community, the foundational reading practices of suburban youth and those individuals in higher socioeconomic communities, and how books are selected and determined to be beneficial for middle and high school students. Each of these topics appeal to at least one theme found in this study.

Project-based learning with a focus on the community would make the lesson more relevant to the students and consequently more engaging. The foundational reading practices and habits of students from other socioeconomic communities with higher reading levels could lead to offering more information to parents. Several participants discussed how their mother or another mentoring adult encouraged reading, so perhaps parents can be offered more strategies to introduce and engage their children in reading. The theme of boredom or low interest in reading also reflected the types of books presented to students. Schools adopt books annually and research as to how books are selected for each grade level may prove helpful in providing students with material that will captivate their interest. Other potential areas worthy of study

might involve a decreased focus in sustained reading time, as two participants noted the focus now is on passage reading and students are rarely introduced to extended novels or texts. The effect of technology and social media on regular classroom teaching and learning may also be an area of concern as both students and teachers alike find themselves constantly multitasking and focusing on several objectives at a time while adjusting to various distractions. An increasing number of children are introduced to technology such as smartphones and tablets at very early ages and this could have an impact on their reading comprehension and ability to analyze extended texts to increasing their deciphering ability for text complexity.

The barriers to reading theme creates another area for future studies. The decreased number of available books in the library with the expectation of society shifting more toward technology might exclude an entire population of students. Additionally, even schools offering students personal laptops and devices fail to consider challenges faced by students whose parents will not register for them to have one or those who have lost or broken devices and cannot afford the replacements costs. In addition, the time it takes to distribute and collect the devices one month into the school year and prior to its close are additional obstacles for students. The shortened available hours for the public library in conjunction with students' extracurricular schedules with the exception of the weekend, almost make it impossible for them to use this resource as well.

On the other hand, future researchers might challenge the necessity of reading extended works and the need to increase Lexile or reading levels. The lived experiences of the teachers is also a noteworthy topic. Teachers of inner city schools may have completed high school and college despite not being able to perform well on standardized tests and may be ill-prepared in teaching students effective approaches in responding to the tests. Additionally, the no pass, no

play rule for athletes is apparently working. The participants of this study made it clear they completed their work so they could play sports. More studies might be concentrated on finding motivation for student learning, particularly for young males, other than sports. Not all students will be interested in football, basketball, or baseball, and there appears to be limited exposure to other potential extracurricular activities that may motivate them to do well in school. The research presented offers several areas in which future studies could prove beneficial to all students.

### **Summary**

In order to increase reading proficiency and create the future leaders of society, all students must be given an opportunity to succeed. Students understand the necessity of knowing how to read and they will read in order to pass the class, but they want more purposeful reading. This is a problem for not only the students, but also parents, teachers, school systems, and, ultimately, society. Individuals who lose interest in school and subsequently fail to read often struggle more in life. It may be found in gaining entrance into college or being gainfully employed and being productive members of society. The purpose of this study was to discover the lived experiences of African American male struggling readers prior to reaching the 11th grade. Participants from an urban, inner-city school were interviewed for their perspectives and descriptions of experiences potentially contributing to their lower-than-average reading levels. Several findings of the study corroborated previous studies in their treatment of available high-interest reading materials to students and the existing barriers to reading. Other findings from this study are new to the empirical literature currently available due to the nature of the participants and the ever-evolving experiences to which they are currently exposed including their lack of knowledge of their reading level and what they consider to be acceptable forms of

reading. As districts and curriculums continue to stress differentiated instruction, they also fail to differentiate testing measures and appeal to their student population.

While it was not the focus of the study, teachers also impact student achievement. Several participants noted how teachers embarrassed them or had higher expectations of them in class. This lends proof of the influence teachers have with their students. However, teachers have an increasingly diminished role in the delivery of material to students. This could alter effective delivery and, subsequently, better student performance. As those entering the field of teaching decreases, class sizes increase and create less focus on individual students and their success. Teacher encouragement increases confidence in students and decreased the social anxiety and embarrassment felt by those students unable to read aloud or at all. Middle- and high-school teachers are responsible for anywhere from three to six times the number of students seen in the elementary school classroom, making teacher workload another area of discussion. Struggling readers cannot afford to fall behind in early grades as the probability of them ever reading on-level greatly diminishes after leaving elementary school as they enter upper grades and have increased responsibilities at school and at home and face more social and commitment obstacles that impact schoolwork.

The implications of the study are simple but require dedication from those far beyond the classroom. Students want to be prepared for life after high school. They want to work or attend school and be able to live productive lives. Curricula need to be more dedicated to preparing students for life after high-school graduation. Teachers need to be allowed to conduct purposeful classroom instruction that engages students and teaches life lessons. Reading is required in all subjects and students understand and respect this. What they do not understand or respect is being presented with material that only prepares them for an end-of-course test having little or no

relevance to their future. Schools should focus more on introducing students to potential career paths through exploratory education and teach them how to analyze arguments and positions for the purpose of being able to challenge and defend information and situations they may encounter. Schools are responsible for imparting knowledge that will allow individuals to be self-sustaining, and reading should provide the foundation for this. However, if students are never engaged, they simply cannot obtain this skill.

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**APPENDIX A: IRB LETTER OF APPROVAL****LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.**  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

October 15, 2018

Nechellar Franklin

**IRB Conditional Approval 3460.101518: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study of the Experiences of African American Male High School Sophomores Who Are Struggling Readers**

Dear Nechellar Franklin,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been **conditionally** approved by the Liberty University IRB. Conditional approval means that your complete approval is pending our receipt of certain items, which are listed below:

-Documented approval from each research site you are enrolling in your study. Acceptable forms of documentation include a letter on official letterhead or a time-and-date stamped email from a person with the authority to grant permission.

Please keep in mind that you are not permitted to begin recruiting participants or collecting data until you have submitted the above item(s) and have been granted complete approval by the Liberty University Institutional Review Board.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well as you continue working toward complete approval.

Sincerely,

*Administrative Chair of Institutional Research*  
**The Graduate School**

**LIBERTY**  
UNIVERSITY.

*Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971*

**APPENDIX: B: SCHOOL LETTER OF APPROVAL**

School System

December 14, 2018

Dear Ms. Franklin:

Your request to conduct the research study "*A Transcendental Phenomenological Study of the Experiences of African American Male High School Sophomores Who Are Struggling Readers*" has been approved. Enclosed is a copy of the Research Agreement. Please note that while this approval permits you to approach individual schools and/or teachers within the Fulton County School system, the final decision regarding participation is a local option and rests with each school principal and teacher. A copy of this letter must be provided to schools along with any correspondence requesting participation in this study.

No identification of Fulton County Schools (students' names, teachers' names, administrators' names, etc.) is to be included in data collected as a part of this study. Also, complete confidentiality of records must be maintained. Please remember to send a summary report once the study is complete to the address below. If any additional information or assistance is needed, please feel free to reach us at \_\_\_\_\_.

We appreciate your interest in conducting research with Fulton County Schools.

Director - Program Evaluation and Research

**APPENDIX C: TEACHER RECRUITMENT LETTER**

January 18, 2019  
ELA Teacher  
Black Scholars High School  
1234 Street Address  
Atlanta, GA 00000

Dear ELA Teacher:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research to better understand the lived experiences of African American sophomore males who struggle in the area of reading. The purpose of my research is to understand the lived experiences of sophomore males who are struggling or have struggled in reading, and I would like to interview a very small sample of students (12) to complete one individual interview. Of those 12, I will also need 6 participants to complete one focus group interview all to be held at the school. At the end of the research week, voluntary participants will also be asked to complete one reflective journal using Remind 101 app. The main research questions will be as follows:

- What are the lived experiences of 10th-grade African-American male students who are struggling readers in the metro-Atlanta area?
- How do 10th-grade African-American male students who are struggling readers describe their attitudes toward reading?
- How do 10th-grade African-American male students who are struggling readers perceive that reading challenges impact their views of self?

I am writing to invite your students to participate in my study.

If you have students with a Lexile level below 8.0 and who are classified as a sophomore in high school who might be willing to participate, I am asking they be offered a chance to participate in this study. It should take approximately 10 minutes for the individual interviews to be completed and no longer than one hour for the focus group interview to occur later in the same week. Your students' participation will be completely anonymous, and no personal or identifying information will be collected.

To participate, please have your students and their parents complete the attached assent / consent form prior to January 30, 2019 and return the documents to me (the researcher) so I can begin scheduling interviews.

A consent document is provided in this package and should be sent home with your qualifying students beginning two weeks before the individual interviews and the one focus group interviews. Both will be scheduled in the media center at the school. The consent document contains additional information about my research, and both students and parents should sign and return it to you prior to the time of the individual interview.

If you choose to participate, you will a modest \$5 Chick-Fil-A gift card for each interview (individual / focus group) and reflective journal completed.

Sincerely,  
*N. Franklin*  
Nechellar Franklin  
Liberty University Grad Student



## APPENDIX D: CONSENT–ASSENT LETTER TO PARENTS

### PARENT/GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM

A Transcendental Phenomenological Study Of The Experiences  
Of African American Male High School Sophomores  
Who Are Struggling Readers  
Ms. Nechellar Franklin  
Liberty University  
School of Education

Your child/student is invited to be in a research study about African American adolescent males who may struggle with reading. The reason for the study is to learn of experiences that may have created contributed to having difficulties in the area of reading. Your child was selected as a possible participant because he is classified as 10<sup>th</sup> grade African American male student in the Atlanta Public School system. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to allow him to be in the study.

Nechellar Franklin, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

**Background Information:** The purpose of this study is to learn of the experiences of teenaged African American boys that might have created a struggle with reading.

**Procedures:** If you agree to allow your child to be in this study, I would ask him to do the following things:

1. Participate in an individual interview with me after school in order to answer 10 basic questions about their reading experiences. This interview should last between 15 and 20 minutes. The interview will be audio recorded so I can review the information later.
2. Some participants will be asked to volunteer to participate in an audio recorded focus group interview within the same week.
3. All participants will be asked to complete one reflective journal entry using the GroupMe app.

**Risks:** The risks involved in this study: The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life. There is no physical interaction required and students will only be asked to meet once for the individual interview. Select students will be asked to meet later the same week for a focus group discussion.

**Disclaimer:** As a mandatory reporter, any information involving child abuse, child neglect, or intent to harm self or others must be disclosed to the proper authorities.

**Benefits:** Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include understanding issues faced by teenaged males in regards to reading and education.

**Compensation:** Your child will be compensated for participating in this study in the form of a \$5 Chick-Fil-A gift card at each stage of the study for agreeing to participate. If the participant becomes uncomfortable at any point during the interview, he may stop and dismiss himself without penalty.

**Confidentiality:** The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a participant. Audio recordings will be kept in a locked file cabinet or on a password protected device and all data will be deleted after the

federally required three year wait period. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings. Interviews will be held in a secure location where the responses cannot easily be overheard. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed for later interpretation. I cannot assume participants of the focus group interview will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group. . Again, all research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records. I may share the data I collect from your child for use in future research studies or with other researchers; if I share the data that I collect about your child, I will remove any information that could identify him, if applicable, before I share the data.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:** Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to allow your child to participate will not affect his current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to allow your child to participate, he is free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time.

**How to Withdraw from the Study:** If your child chooses to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should your child choose to withdraw, any data collected, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but any contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if your child chooses to withdraw.

**Contacts and Questions:** The researcher conducting this study is Nechellar Franklin. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at 404-593-9212 or nfranklin@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty advisor, Dr. Lucinda Spaulding, at lsspaulding@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Green Hall 1887, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

*Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.*

**Statement of Consent:** I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to allow my child to participate in the study.

(NOTE: DO NOT AGREE TO ALLOW YOUR CHILD TO PARTICIPATE UNLESS IRB APPROVAL INFORMATION WITH CURRENT DATES HAS BEEN ADDED TO THIS DOCUMENT.)

The researcher has my permission to audio record my child/student as part of his participation in this study.

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Signature of Minor

Date

---

Signature of Parent

Date

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Signature of Investigator

Date

**APPENDIX E: SEMISTRUCTURED INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. What do you think about when you hear the word “read”? Or, what thoughts, ideas, or things come to mind when you think of reading
2. Describe what it was like for you living in the community in which you grew up.
3. Describe your earliest encounter or experience with reading – whether someone was reading to you or if you were reading on your own.
4. How do you feel about leisurely reading right now?
5. How do you feel about reading for school assignments?
6. Do your teachers, family members, or others influence your desire to read? If so how? If not, why do you think this is the case?
7. Do you think there any long-term benefits in reading on a regular basis? If so, what are they? If not, why do you feel this way?
8. If there was ever a time when you began to like or dislike reading, around what age might it have been and what happened?
9. Do you think suspensions affect the interest in reading at all? If so, how?
10. Including your use of social media and daily occurrences, how many minutes or hours do you think you read in a typical day?
11. Do you feel your reading level, ability, or interest level affects your level of self-esteem in any way? If so, how? If not, explain.
12. What stereotypes do you think exist as it relates to your generation and reading?
13. How do you feel about those stereotypes?
14. Is there anything you would like to share about your past experiences with reading?

**APPENDIX F: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. How many books have you read in the past year?
2. What genre or types of books do you prefer to read?
3. What do you think of students, particularly boys who read a lot?
4. Do you struggle at all when reading books in class? If so, in what way? If not, why do you not select more challenging books?
5. Do you have a method for figuring out the meanings of words? What is it?
6. Do you easily forget what you have read? If so, why do you think this happens?
7. Do you think reading relates to real life? How? Or, why not?
8. If applicable, what do you think keeps you from reading or motivates you to read? If applicable, what motivates you to read?
9. What social factors affect your desire or opportunity to read for pleasure? (Think about video games, extra-curricular activities, time with friend, and social media.
10. What do you believe to be the purpose of reading?
11. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being very true and 1 being not true at all, please rate the following:
  - You enjoy reading books you read in class.
  - You enjoy reading books you select for yourself
  - You would read more if you had time.
  - Your friends affect your desire or time to read.
  - You enjoy reading out loud in class.
  - Teachers assist you with your reading.
  - You understand the importance of reading fluently and understanding passages.

**APPENDIX G: REFLECTIVE JOURNAL PROMPTS**

1. Reflect on your personal experiences with reading. Are there any particular experiences that stifled your desire to read that you have not previously shared? Describe the incident?
2. Think about how you read again. What prevents you from reading or reading more challenging texts?
3. If applicable, do you think you would read for pleasure? Explain your response.
4. Who do you think influences your desire to read the most? Why?
5. Thinking about the one-on-one interview or the focus group (if applicable), what feelings or memories did it create for you as it relates to reading that have not been shared?
6. What would you like to say about the purpose of this study?