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Understanding the Lived Experiences of African American Males in a Middle School:
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Understanding the Lived Experiences of African American Males in a Middle School:

What Makes Them Achieve

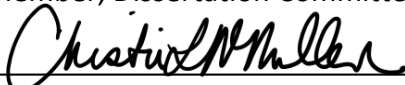Augustina Bryan

Curriculum and Instruction Doctoral Program

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to allow students to make meaning of and understand their positionality within an academic setting while providing teachers and instructional staff with insight into personal experiences of African American middle school male students within the context of eligibility. Student voice was the primary form of description for this research. Each individual had a different perspective based on class, culture, age, religion, and environment, among other factors. The individual differences impacted the students' and my own construction of meaning. The paper is organized as follows: (a) Chapter One: Introduction; (b) Chapter Two: Review of the Literature; (c) Chapter Three: Methodology; (d) Chapter Four: Results; and (e) Chapter Five: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations. The phenomenological method was utilized in order to conduct interviews and observations of the students within a school setting.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

We were asked to evaluate the successes and failures of Maryland's public schools with regard to African American males' school readiness; reading, math, and science; achievement; attendance, graduation, suspension, and expulsion rates; participation in advanced academic programs; and college and career preparation. The Task Force did, indeed, address these topics. But because many found it difficult to sever what they consider the inextricable connection between a child's emotional well-being and his academic success, many topics are substantially influenced by the social context in which they occur. (State of Maryland, 2007, p. vi)

Problem Background

A task force had to be created at the Maryland state level to address the continuing concerns surrounding African American male achievement. Specifically, why are African American males continuing to perform at lower academic levels than their same age peers? The work of the task force summarized above can be instructive as it informs scholars of African American male achievement about the need for research that examines the nonquantifiable influences on African American male student academic success in ways that may complicate the process of root cause analysis. Moreover, the task force found that it is difficult to separate social-emotional, cultural, environmental, and societal factors from academics. Although this task force was created in 2007, the issue of African American male achievement remains relevant in 2016. According to the Schott Foundation's (2015) 50 state report on public education and Black males, Maryland has an 18% gap between Black male graduation rates and White male graduation rates. Black males graduate in Maryland at a 66% graduation rate, while

White males graduate at an 84% rate as of 2012–2013.

Historical literature and studies pertaining to the achievement goal theory focused on predominantly Caucasian students and, more recently, Asian students (Hart et al., 2013). According to Hart et al. (2013), "achievement goal theory offers a framework for understanding student motivation and behavior by distinguishing between different achievement goals" (p. 286). Notably missing from the research are African American students. The task force created in Maryland sought to identify factors that encourage African American achievement. Hart et al. identified three areas that are missing in the achievement goal literature. The current study sought to fill the gap in the area of examining achievement goals of African American youth due to inconsistent findings in this area of research. Adding the actual voices of African American students contributed another layer of analysis to the research.

In response to mounting pressures and concerns regarding African American students, male or female, local county school jurisdictions created their own quantifiable research reports about the state of the African American student. The jurisdiction observed for this project, Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland, publishes a yearly report that chronicles the attempts made and progress towards closing the achievement gap, race being one of the areas (Our Call to Action: Pursuit of Excellence 2015). One goal of the Call to Action 2015 is that all students will achieve or exceed proficiency standards in mathematics, reading, writing, science, and government on local and state assessments—standards that seek high stakes test results as the only viable form of achievement to gauge the educational progress of African American males. The call to action report is the reason why this study is significant and will take place in the state of

Maryland.

At the middle school level, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) involves the quintessential quantifiable tools given to measure the reading skill level and math skill level of individual students and groups of students in order to compare subgroups and all groups. For 2016, PARCC continues to show that African American students are struggling to meet the standards set as set forth by Common Core state standards in the areas of reading and math. In order to be scored as proficient or advanced, at grade level or higher, students need to score at Levels 4 or 5 out of five levels. A score of Level 1 would mean that a student did not meet expectations (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, n.d.). African American students in the school district continue to struggle to meet the standards of Levels 4 or 5 when compared to their county and state peers.

In the area of math, African American students scored 65.9%, which is an increase from the prior year but still well below the proficiency rate of 78.6% (Maryland State Department of Education, 2019). To narrow the scope even further, the African American students at the school of study, which is the site for the current research study, scored 85.7%, which is proficient, but scored a 66.1% in math. The African American student scores closely resemble the overall county scores for African American students. When broken down by gender, African American males outscored African American females in math in Grades 6 and 7, while African American females outscored African American males in Grade 8. African American females outscored African American males in reading in Grades 7 and 8, and were within 1% of African American males in Grade 6. This was the basis for the current study.

The current study sought to identify the needs of African American male middle school students. More specifically, the study aimed to determine what nonquantifiable social and cultural experiences may influence whether and how they want to learn and to be taught. To be taught something is subjective or beholden by the student. Why are the African American males in a majority African American middle school severely underperforming in the school and county when compared to their White and Asian counterparts? This underperformance is evidenced not only by quantifiable tools like federal and standardized state assessments and by grade point average, but also by structure, culture, and surveys of experiences teaching and learning together. All of these questions support recent literature on culturally responsive instruction focusing on underperforming African American males (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Milner, 2014).

More studies need to be conducted by teacher practitioners in order to implement practical teacher pedagogy that addresses the type of questions raised in my teaching (Milner, 2014; Sleeter, 2001). Inquiries about structure, culture, and teaching and learning experiences, coupled with the complexity and limitations of the task force reported above, moved the study toward questioning African American males qualitatively. A qualitative lens allowed the ability to begin offering African American male students an alternative academic venue to voice their too often silenced (Howard, 2001) academic challenge(s) and negotiations in classroom settings like my own.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to use the qualitative phenomenological method to allow students to make meaning and understand their positionality within an academic

setting. In addition it will provide teachers and instructional staff with insight into the personal experiences of African American male students within the context of eligibility, which is a student's ability to participate in school activities based on grade point average. Individuals have a different perspective on what it means to be academically motivated and/or successful based on class, culture, age, religion, and environment, among other factors. The individual differences impacted the students' and my own construction of meaning.

Author and researcher Jawanza Kunjufu (2013) stated that the reason why African American males regress in academic motivation between Kindergarten and Grade 9 is due to a gap between African Americans and educators as well as a lack of understanding of school culture. Kunjufu stated, "If we want to improve school culture, we must understand their world" (p. xvi). Kunjufu's statement speaks to not understanding the world from which African American boys come.

Paulo Freire (2000), author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, expressed a similar sentiment when he stated, "True education begins with the experiences of the people" (p. 93). In his book, Kunjufu explored a variety of reasons as to why African American males must be given a voice in their education. This gap led to the reason for the current study. The narrative method was used as a vehicle to share their thoughts with others and allow for self-reflection of their inner thoughts. It was imperative as the research practitioner to understand that narrative inquiry can lead to a place that differs from the original intent of the research. The students constructed the meaning and thus helped to determine the path that was taken along this journey.

I understand that from a social context, there is a relationship and interaction with

the African American male, first as a member of a racial group and second as a researcher. As the researcher, the research questions helped me to determine why some African American male students seem to "choose" to be active participants in the school setting and others seem to separate or distance themselves from being active participants as students.

In teaching reading to a group of eighth grade students, the majority of whom were male and African American, I did not understand why African American male students were doing so poorly. Delving deeper, below the bravado of many students, is needed in order to even begin to understand this problem (Dance, 2002). What some may describe as "apathy," "lack of motivation," and other interests all seemed to outweigh the value that I, as the teacher, and now researcher, placed on quantitative measures of the so-called "academic achievement" of African American males in the classroom. Moreover, there is a need to rethink how these young men are being diagnosed and labeled without their input (Ferguson, 2000), without asking them to name the important forces that support and constrain their opportunities, abilities, and willingness to learn well and to demonstrate what they learned well.

Research Questions

The qualitative phenomenological research study was guided by two questions that sought to determine how African American males identify successful instruction. The specific purpose of this study was guided by two questions related to African American male adolescent achievement in middle school.

1. How do African American male middle school students experience and understand what it means to be a student?

2. What are the instructional implications for teaching African American male

    middle school students based on their lived experiences?

Definition of Terms

Specific terms are referenced throughout this study; a majority of the terms are

specific to middle school education and students. The following is a list of terms that

need to be defined in preparation for the analysis of the study:

Culturally relevant teaching. Having the explicit knowledge about cultural

diversity that is imperative to meeting the educational needs of ethnically diverse students

(Gay, 2002).

Eligibility. A student's grade point average when it is above a 2.0.

Lived experiences. The day-to-day living experience and events that an individual

feels and goes through from their own perspective (Van Manen, 1990).

Narrative inquiry. The study of experience through the use of stories.

NCLB. No Child Left Behind is the federal law that holds school districts

responsible for the progress of all students.

Nonexperimental research. This type of research design is also known as

descriptive research. The goal of this research is to examine events or phenomena

through description and seeking explanation without manipulation of variables.

Phenomenological study. A more specific form of human exploration that

involves investigating a phenomenon within a real-life context and exploring themes that

develop (Yin, 1984).

Student participants.   The students who are the participants in the case study and whose voice is being sought (Harcourt et al., 2011).

Significance of the Study

The goal of this phenomenological study was to determine how student narratives provide a voice and additional information about the internal and external influences that motivate them to succeed in academic settings. The research on student experiences served as a means of constructing theory about African American male student lived experiences. As the researcher, I had prior knowledge of theories that may have been closely related to the lived experiences of students, which were used as a lens for analytical review. The responses determined if there was a link to any particular construct. Culturally relevant theory and critical race theory have been connected to the theoretical framework, which will be discussed at the conclusion of the data gathering phase. Results of the study will inform teacher instructional practices at both the school and county levels.

Ford et al. (2015) and Martin (2012) suggested that school systems should be more concerned with understanding the unique experiences of African American students environmentally, socially, and interpersonally while attending school. The current study sought to fill part of this gap by giving voice to African American student experiences. As a result of this study, administrators, teacher practitioners, community advocates, and student stakeholders will be able to create school environments that address the needs of African American students. The literature review for the current study focused on specific areas that support instructional change to include culturally responsive instruction, motivation, achievement, and student voice.

Limitations of the Study

As a coparticipant within the same school setting as my participants, the phenomenological method had inherent risks and/or biases that must be acknowledged. First, the description and interpretation of the student participant descriptions were subjective. The beauty of the phenomenological method is that it allows multiple descriptions and interpretations to be embraced. My role was not to define the student behaviors but to allow the students to define and describe their own roles and feelings. Awareness of the possible bias in this study was the best way to counteract the bias itself (Guba & Lincoln, 1981).

Another potential risk was the lack of effective communication between the students and myself. In order to get African American male students to open up and share their thoughts, it was necessary to create an atmosphere of trust. This may have presented a challenge as students may have felt that there was a likelihood that I would share confidential information because I also work in the school that the students attend. A large part of the initial time with participants was spent establishing a rapport and creating an environment of trust. Finally, personal bias must be acknowledged, as bias was the reason that led to studying the current phenomenon. Because my past experience working and trying to motivate Black male students in a reading class is directly related to the current research, I made a concerted effort not to measure but to describe, listen, and portray the thoughts and feelings of the students.

The demographics of the study presented another limitation. While exploring

African American males was needed to answer the research questions, the results will only be able to be generalized to the African American male population. Due to time constraints and the process of phenomenology, which requires an in-depth analysis, identifying one group was necessary for the current study. The benefits of the study outweigh any possible limitations that may exist. The narrative evidence will support the need to include student voices when determining how to instruct African American males.

Delimitations of the Study

One of the delimitations of the study was that it only explored African American male middle school students. In an ideal situation, other minority subgroups would also be explored in order to develop a comparison. Focusing on one subgroup allowed for a more in-depth study of their personal experiences. This subgroup also spoke directly to the gap in the literature surrounding African American male youth voices.

Educational outcomes of the study may provide insight into instructional practices focused on the needs of African American males. While a quantitative approach could have been used to gain a broader range of data, this method would have lacked a narrative analysis. Comparing one middle school group to another middle school group in a different area would be useful for future analysis, but in this study, time was a constraint.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The current study was guided by two questions related to African American male adolescent achievement in middle school. The first question was: What are the preferred learning styles of successful African American male middle school students? The second question was: What are the preferred learning styles of failing African American male middle school students? This chapter examines these questions by providing analyses of (a) critical race theory, (b) impact of culturally responsive teaching, (c) motivation in African American students, (d) listening and understanding student voices in relation to academic attitudes, (e) listening and understanding student voices in relation to disenfranchised populations, and (f) understanding the relationship between identity and learning. The chapter concludes with a summary of literature findings and chapter summary.

Problem

We were asked to evaluate the successes and failures of Maryland's public schools with regard to African-American males' school readiness; reading, math, and science achievement; attendance, graduation, suspension, and expulsion rates; participation in advanced academic programs; and college and career preparation. The Task Force did, indeed, address these topics. But because many found it difficult to sever what they consider the inextricable connection between a child's emotional well-being and his academic success, many topics are substantially influenced by the social context in which they occur. (State of Maryland, 2007, p. vi)

A task force had to be created at the Maryland state level to address the continuing concerns surrounding African American male achievement. The work of the task force summarized above can be instructive as it informs scholars of African American male achievement about the need for research that examines the nonquantifiable influences on African American male student academic success in ways that may complicate the process of root cause analysis. Moreover, the task force found that it is hard to separate social-emotional, cultural, environmental, and societal factors from academics. Although this task force was created in 2007, the issue of African American male achievement remains relevant in 2016. According to the *Black Boys Report* (Schott Foundation, 2015), the concerns of the task force continue to exist today. In Maryland, African American males are 18% less likely to graduate. This statistic is the driving force behind the current study that focused on understanding the factors that support African American male achievement.

There is an array of literature that exists to explain part of the essence of the phenomenon currently under study. The purpose of this study was to focus on literature related to studying the voices of African American male children in regards to their achievement in middle school. In addition, literature was reviewed as it relates to race theories that have been found to contribute to academic progress of African American students. Student identity as African American students was reviewed along with research related to students' negotiations of whether and how they want to learn and to be taught. The other primary stakeholder in the discussion of African American students is the teacher. The instructional implications for teachers of African American students are also reviewed below. Qualitative phenomenological methodology and narrative

storytelling are addressed in the Methodology section. "Qualitative research proposals must begin the research with a clear direction but with the anticipation that as data gathering and analysis proceed, the questions, methods, design, and participants may all shift somewhat" (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 50).

Phenomenology was best suited for this study in order to better understand the lived experiences of African American males in an academic setting. Constructivism provides an "in-depth exploration of human action and experience, as well as the meaning that human beings make as a result" (Saunders, 2007, p. 72). While investigating meaning or construction around the topic of African American male ineligibility—defined as a having a grade point average of less than 2.0—this research served as an opportunity to give a voice to African American male students so that they were able to explore the context of their individual academic performance while allowing me to interpret a phenomenon that is grounded in the lived experiences of the participants (Gibson, 2008). While there was a phenomenon to be explored, I was not able to predetermine the outcome or even the actions that may have been observed. Descriptive case study research involves studying a phenomenon using narrative in order to provide a description through the lens of the participant (Merriam, 1998). This research was an interpretation of the lived experiences of African American male students in an academic setting.

Whereas a descriptive case study focuses only on the rich description of the phenomenon under study without a need to formulate or establish a hypothesis, interpretive case study delves deeper into the descriptive data collected and seeks to interpret or analyze the information gathered regarding the phenomenon under study.

The current study fell between a phenomenological study and a descriptive case study. Both aspects were present, but the method used was inherently focused on identifying the lived experiences of a small group of students. It was difficult to predict the findings prior to beginning the research. It was my hope that the research would yield enough data to be able to theorize about the phenomenon. The students in my study were active participants, and as such, they determined the outcome. This is why the phenomenological case study method was appropriate for my research. Existing theory focuses on the performance of African American male students as reviewed in the literature review section. Bromley (1986) stated that the researcher should "get as close to the subject of interest as they possibly can, partly by means of direct observation in natural settings, partly by their access to subjective factors such as thoughts, feelings, and desires" (p. 23).

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory

According to Lynn and Adams (2002), "racism is a historical and ideological construct" (p. 88). This quote is the heart of critical race theory (CRT). CRT as a theoretical framework began in the post-civil rights movement era of the mid-1970s. According to Ladson-Billings (as cited in Ball, 2006), the most notable early theorists of CRT were Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman. CRT began as an outgrowth of a legal movement, critical legal studies, that was interested in uncovering the link between American legal ideology and the continued civil rights inequities. Critical legal studies did not focus on racism as part of the civil rights discourse, which is how CRT evolved by legal scholars of color. The CRT movement began steeped in the laws of the United

States legal system. Lynn and Adams stated that "CRT was in response to the failures of traditional civil rights litigation to produce meaningful and lasting racial reform" (as cited in Parker et al., p. 87). It was not until the 1980s that CRT began to be used as a vehicle to analyze the problem of minority learning and being taught in schools. The basic foundation of CRT is that race accounts for school inequities between minorities and Whites.

Two of the leading theorists in the area of CRT, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), outlined three propositions of CRT that link social inequity with school inequity.

1. Race continues to be a significant factor in determining equity in the United States.

2. U.S. society is based on property rights.

3. The intersection of race and property creates an analytical tool through which one can understand social (and consequently school) inequity (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

It is the third proposition that will be explored more deeply to explain the features of CRT and the relationship between schooling and inequality. On the surface, those with property tend to have greater access to more resources, to include educational resources. Historically, African Americans were seen as property, and Bell (1992) asserted that the purpose of U.S. laws and government is to protect the rights of property owners while simultaneously not protecting the rights of African Americans as human beings due to race. Subsequently, decades later, race still remains a factor in keeping African Americans a subordinated group. This subordination extends to schooling. CRT

theorists such as Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) believed that racial inequities are the result of sociohistorical racial constructs that are based in the history of the United States.

There are four features of CRT that can be translated from the legal beginnings to analyzing schooling and inequality. The first feature of CRT is that race is so enmeshed within U.S. society that it is a fixed part of American life (Bell, 1992). This feature can be translated to schooling because school is a part of U.S. society. It is a question of which comes first: Poor children do poorly, or African Americans are disproportionately poor, which contributes to lower academic outcomes. Either way, race is at the heart of both arguments. Racism is embedded within the policies of education as well as the overall structure of educational systems.

According to CRT, White dominant society refuses to do what is necessary to reorganize the structures in place that continue to relegate minorities to positions that continue to create the achievement gap, such as that seen in the school system (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). There is a fear that completing a reorganization would not allow the needs of White society to continue to be placed as the priority or standard against which all other ethnic groups must be compared (Howard, 2008).

This leads to the second feature. CRT states that civil rights laws should be changed to better address the educational needs of minorities and not have as its main focus making sure that Whites remain happy or, in other words, that Whites are the main beneficiaries of civil rights laws (Ball, 2006, p. 302). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) provided an example of this when they stated, "Model desegregation is one that ensures that Whites are happy (and do not leave the system altogether) regardless of whether African Americans and other students of color achieve or remain" (p. 56). There is an

inherent inequity in schooling that looks to appease the dominant White culture under the guise of addressing the educational needs of students of color. Another example would be the use of magnet lottery programs that are in actuality a means of making White society happy if schools must be desegregated. Magnet lottery programs offer specialty education programs that can only be accessed at a select few schools. Access to these specialized programs is not at every school, but rather students are selected via lottery that helps to balance the student demographics (Prince George's County Public Schools, n.d.). Laws should be continuously analyzed and modified if needed based on the state of education of students of color and not based on contentment of dominant culture. The third feature is that each individual has a unique experience and a personal voice to use to retell their educational experience.

CRT theorists Howard (2008) and Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) rebuked the belief that a person, society, or school can be color blind or neutral. Each student, teacher, administrator, policymaker, and American citizen has unique experiences through which a view of the world is constructed, including race issues. Experience is the foundation through which social reality is viewed (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 57). The dominant White society is most likely unaware of how their privilege maintains the oppressor/oppressed status. In education, the voices of students of color need to be heard to make the unaware members of society aware of racist policies and structures that are in place. The final feature of CRT is that Whiteness has been constructed by the dominant culture as property. Whiteness is the ultimate cultural property which only Whites can possess and ultimately pass on (Harris, 1993, p. 172). Whiteness as defined by Henry and Tator (2006)

is manifested by the ways in which racialized Whiteness becomes transformed

into social, political, economic, and cultural behavior. White culture, norms, and

values in all these areas become normative natural. They become the standard

against which all other cultures, groups, and individuals are measured and usually

found to be inferior. (pp. 46–67)

This definition infers that if one is not White, then one's cultural practices are not valued.

In school, this is manifested through policies that value Whiteness as the ideal. Anything

that is seen as not fitting the White ideal is seen as less than or not achieving a certain

status.

Historical Overview of African American Males and Education

As Gloria Ladson-Billings, former president of the American Educational

Research Association, has noted, the problem we face is less an "achievement gap" than

an educational debt that has accumulated over centuries of denied access to education and

employment, reinforced by deepening poverty and resource inequalities in schools. Until

American society confronts the accumulated educational debt owed to these students and

takes responsibility for the inferior resources they receive, Ladson-Billings argued,

children of color and of poverty will continue to be left behind (as cited in Darling-

Hammond, 2007, para. 9).

As Darling-Hammond stated, the achievement gap is actually a result of unequal

access to resources that are necessary to succeed in the dominant culture. Culture, race,

language acquisition of dominant culture, social class, and gender all are contributing

factors in the achievement gap that exists today between African Americans, Latinos,

Whites, and Asians because these factors are seen as inferior if they do not match the

White middle class (Darling-Hammond, 2007). Specifically, according to authors Irene Serna and Amy Wells (1996), the cultural elite run the schools. The cultural elite were described as "those with the combination of economic, political, and cultural capital that is highly valued within their particular school community" (Serna & Wells, 1996, p. 160). Tracking efforts in their schools are threatening to their position in power at the top of the social strata (1996, p. 162). As cultural elite parents they have a stranglehold over the decisions that are made at their children's schools (Serna & Wells, 1996, p. 163).

According to Serna and Wells (1996), if cultural elite parents were to discuss the classes their children were taking versus the classes the culturally irrelevant students take, they would notice their kids are in higher classes. Serna and Wells argued that the cultural elite parents would rationalize the disparity by saying that their kids have a higher academic ability or a better family life. What would be left out of the explanation is the privilege their children have due to the class into which they were born (Serna & Wells, 1996).

Cultural elite parents would also probably leave out their true feelings about mixing upper-class students with lower-class students (Serna & Wells, 1996). Parent beliefs regarding the upper class and society as a whole are major contributors to the racial and class stratification that has led to tracking in American schools. School structure thrives on rewarding those students who are deemed "deserving minorit[ies]" (Serna & Wells, 1996).

Impact of Culturally Responsive Teaching on African American Males

Multicultural education as defined by Banks and Banks (2004) is "a field of study designed to increase educational equity for all students that incorporates, for this purpose,

content, concepts, principles, theories, and paradigms from history, the social and behavioral sciences, and particularly from ethnic studies and women's studies" (p. xii). Banks and Banks' five dimensions of multicultural education are content integration, knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and empowering school culture and social structure.

Content integration is the dimension that many educators use in their classrooms as a means of being culturally responsive teachers (Banks & Banks, 2004). The problem with this outlook is that this dimension is often the crux of culturally responsive teaching for mainstream teachers unaware of how to truly reach diverse student populations (Ozturgut, 2011). Teachers begin incorporating content and examples from different cultural groups in order to teach key concepts and theories while often not understanding the reasons behind the mandate to include more representative content (Taylor et al., 2016). Teachers cannot truly teach using a multicultural theory approach if they do not understand why it is necessary to be inclusive of all groups when teaching content (Ozturgut, 2011). There is no question that a component of culturally responsive teaching belongs in this first dimension of multicultural education and should be integrated into preservice teacher programs (Taylor et al., 2016).

Geneva Gay (2000) defined culturally responsive teaching as "having the explicit knowledge about cultural diversity that is imperative to meeting the educational needs of ethnically diverse students" (p. 107). Teachers should understand the cultural characteristics and contributions of the students they teach by becoming knowledgeable about cultural differences in learning styles, communication, community, and family values (Gay, 2000). Teachers should choose which areas to concentrate on by

determining the parts of culture that may have a direct impact on teaching and learning (Gay, 2000). Becoming knowledgeable in and of itself is not sufficient enough to warrant being classified as a culturally responsive teacher (Nieto, 2000). Teachers must use their knowledge of culturally responsive teaching to translate into actual teacher practices within the classroom (Ming et al., 2017). The process itself, which could also be explained in the knowledge construction dimension, is another requirement Gay (2000) stated is necessary in developing a culturally responsive teacher. Many teachers are only aware of the contributions of a select few high-profile minorities. This is an area that is often accepted by school districts as being culturally responsive (Ming et al., 2017).

Gay (2000) argued that teachers need to combine the use of multicultural instructional strategies with the addition of authentic cross-curricular contributions of minorities. The purpose of using multicultural strategies should be understood by all teachers so that authentic learning and understanding can occur (Gay, 2000; Nieto, 2000). This would require teachers to not only use multicultural theories and strategies, but to be able to comprehend the theories involved in culturally responsive teaching. Effective strategies for use with diverse student populations include embracing cultural communication techniques in class, including minority contributions, using personal experiences, and communicating high expectations for all students through the use of rigorous curriculum (Gay, 2000). There are implications for universities as well because courses need to be created that delve into the content area subjects while simultaneously discussing the contributions of minorities (Ming et al., 2017).

Teaching Diverse Populations

Liou et al. (2017) conducted an ethnographic study to analyze how school districts or environments continue to inadvertently encourage the deficit model theory. The participants were low-SES minority students from an urban high school. The authors used the urban sanctuary school framework to have students explain in their own voice the challenges in school as well as their teachers' expectations of them. Overall, the study found that more efforts need to be made to transform school structures from having a deficit model to a more inclusive high expectation model. This leads to the next area that impacts teaching diverse populations.

Teachers need to work on adjusting personal biases and assumptions that can alter the manner in which they teach "other people's children," as recognized by Lisa Delpit (1988). The most successful teachers of diverse urban student populations are those teachers who understand their own self-image and how that image makes them connected or disconnected from students and the community in general (Delpit, 1988). Teaching diverse student populations does not merely mean that teachers should share the same ethnic/linguistic background, although studies and scholars such as Nieto (2000), Gay (2000), and Otzurgut (2011) have found this to be important. However, it is more important to develop relationships with students and exhibit signs of caring about the well-being of the student (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Cochran-Smith's (2004) first category stated that effective teachers of students of color have the belief that minority students are capable of mastering learning at high intellectual levels.

Cochran-Smith's second category is termed "ideologies and political frameworks." Cochran-Smith's category is situated within Banks and Banks' (1995)

equity pedagogy because there are educational ideologies that teachers believe must be altered in order to ensure equitable teaching and opportunities for all children. One ideology that requires greater attention is the role of the teacher in school and the purpose for schooling (Cochran-Smith, 2004). Cochran-Smith believed that the role of the teacher is to merge teaching to acquire knowledge with the role of activist. Teachers need to know that their role is to teach all students how to further their education and activism in creating equitable practices for all Americans (Cochran-Smith, 2004).

In another scholarly review, Villegas and Lucas (2002), described lack of cultural compatibility and found that successful teachers of students of color adjust their teaching and discourse to mimic the cultural patterns of the students they teach. This is very similar to the overall framework of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000). Teaching diverse student populations involves wanting to learn about cultures different from one's own while embracing and including practices that will enable minority students to succeed (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Cultural congruency means changing teaching practices so they more closely resemble the cultural and linguistic patterns of the students being taught (Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

Achinsten and Aguirre (2008) also discovered a lack of literature and data that focus on cultural match or congruency between teachers of color and students of color. Achinstein and Aguirre's study found that there is a lack of support for teachers of color who also teach students of color. This concept differs from the previously described theories by trying to mimic the cultural patterns of students rather than acknowledging and embracing student culture (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Irvine (1988) argued that the benefits of cultural synchronicity cannot be denied when observing African American

students being taught by African American teachers. This is not to say that Irvine does not think White teachers can teach minority students. Rather, Irvine believed that African American teachers, and likely Latino teachers, have a distinct cultural advantage when it comes to teaching children of similar cultural/linguistic backgrounds (Irvine, 1988). White teachers, who make up the majority of the teacher workforce, can still be effective teachers to students of color (Delpit, 1988; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). This can be accomplished by White teachers taking an active and not just an outsider role in learning and embracing the culture of the students they teach (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Each of these theories brings the current study to the forefront of the need for research on African American male education based on the needs of African American male students.

Academic Attitudes of African American Students

The previous section focused on instructional implications of teaching diverse populations. One component of instruction involves the actual student stakeholder. Students have their own individual academic attitudes that may impact their academic progress (Tang et al., 2016). Wang and Holcombe (2010) conducted a short-term longitudinal research that examined the relationships among middle school students' perceptions of school environment, school engagement, and academic achievement. Participants were from a representative, ethnically diverse, urban sample of 1,046 students. The findings supported the theoretical conceptualization of three different, but related, dimensions of school engagement: school participation, sense of identification with school, and use of self-regulation strategies. The results also indicated that students' perceptions of the distinct dimensions of school environment in seventh grade contributed differentially to the three types of school engagement in eighth grade.

Finally, the authors found that students' perceptions of school environment influenced their academic achievement directly and indirectly through the three types of school engagement. Specifically, students' perceptions of school characteristics in seventh grade influenced their school participation, identification with school, and use of self-regulation strategies in eighth grade that occurred therein and influenced students' academic achievement in eighth grade (Wang & Holcombe, 2010). This study supports the purpose of the current study to identify factors that impact student progress.

Tyson (2002) conducted an ethnographic study to facilitate more studies on the school attitudes/outcomes of elementary age African American students by using the voices of those students in field of sociology. The research question indirectly stated what role school experience has in developing school related attitudes toward academic progress and learning in African Americans. The setting was a Black independent school and a majority Black public middle school. Both schools were middle class with mixed levels. Teachers, students, and parents all contributed to the study. This was an ethnographic study that included field notes, formal and informal interviews, and observation. Themes were created based on student responses during interviews. The results of the study found that school helps to develop student attitudes and that academic failure can be due to wanting to avoid failure again (Tyson, 2002, p. 1184). These results relate to the current study's research purpose of understanding why some students do not achieve while others do.

Long et al. (2007) studied the extent to which gender, achievement goal orientations, and self-efficacy predict domain interests in urban adolescents who are predominately African American. They also wanted to determine, within the same urban

setting, the extent to which gender, achievement goal orientations, self-efficacy, and domain interests predict achievement. In May, eighth grade students were tested on resilience and then tested again in December or February of their ninth-grade year as determined by course placement. This smaller study was also the beginning of another study on the transition from middle school to high school. The results were that the domain of interest was found to not have as strong of an effect on achievement as in previous studies in eighth grade and was insignificant in ninth grade (Long et al., 2008, p. 213). Expressing an interest or desire is not enough to achieve if there is not enough knowledge to further personal interest. Self-belief was moderately strong in the minority population but did not match outcome/performance. The voice of the student was missing from this study. The results show implications for how having a voice can help determine findings. Personal interest was not defined in this study by the student (Long et al., 2008).

Irving and Hudley (2005) believed that African American male students had lower academic values due to having a negative perception of dominant culture. The authors sought to determine if effects of cultural mistrust that have been found in middle school students were similar for high school students. A theme of negativity continued in this study when determining if there was a connection between academics and perception. They also wanted to measure the relationship between cultural mistrust, academic values, and academic outcome expectations among a sample of African American high school students. The results showed a negative relationship between cultural mistrust and outcome value. Cultural mistrust and outcome value predicted education outcome expectations. Overall, high levels of cultural mistrust led to low

outcome expectations and outcome values. Using several cultural and social models as a frame of reference, the authors suggested that their findings were due to African American students having a protective mechanism to survive in school (Irving & Hudley, 2005).

More recently, Tyrone Howard (2013) conducted research on African American males and their academic experience from PK-12. Howard sought to identify research that focused on successful high-achieving African American male students rather than students who have problems. Howard found that African American male students continue to face major obstacles that prevent them from closing the achievement gap. However, he also found that this population exhibited resilience in spite of the number of socioeconomic, and structural barriers that may exist for them. More studies should focus on the African American male students who are performing and meeting standards to determine what those students and schools may be doing differently (Howard, 2013). In order to truly understand African American male academic performance, one must understand what it is like to be perceived as a disenfranchised or impacted population.

Disenfranchised Populations

This section focuses on how African American youth have become a part of a disenfranchised population—students who do not have an economic, social, or political voice in education. Bergeron et al. (2013) conducted a study that involved implementing an intervention program to improve the interpersonal skills of at-risk high school students. This study differed from a traditional research format in that the authors implemented an action with the intent of causing a change in the interactions of a group of students. Traditional research looks to identify causes or theories (Johnson, 2016) that

would explain why the group of students lack interpersonal skills. The purpose of the study was to determine if implementing a structured interpersonal skills program would help improve at-risk high school students' social skills. The authors posited that improving their social and interpersonal skills would also improve their academic success. As an action research study, the authors targeted an intervention that would allow the participants to apply the skills they learned from the program. Additionally, based on the findings, the authors planned to incorporate the program in local high schools with similar populations.

Participants were selected based on at-risk criteria from local high schools such as "test scores, drop-out rates, attendance rates, or suspension rates" (Bergeron et al., 2013, p. 4). The 84 students selected took a pretest using the Social Skills Rating Scale (Gresham & Elliott, 1990) to determine their baseline social skills rating. The intervention involved having the students meet once a week for 8 weeks in small groups of less than six students for 30 min to an hour. Behavior intervention specialists used the PREPARE interpersonal skills curriculum with the students in small groups. After the 8 weeks, the students took the Social Skills Rating Scale (Gresham & Elliott, 1990) again to determine if growth occurred. The results revealed a statistically significant increase in participants' scores. All participants except one were African American. The most notable difference was between gender. Males increased an average of 22 points while females increased an average of 12 points. The findings suggest that implementing an intervention program targeted towards at-risk populations will help improve the social and interpersonal skills of high school students.

Motivation in African American Male Students

While the literature on student motivation has increased over the years (Deci et al., 1999; Gottfried, 1990; Stipek, 1996; Turner, 1995), literature focused on minority groups or lower socioeconomic groups is not as fruitful when investigating motivation/perception on secondary students. Harvey et al. (2016) sought to gather more evidence and data to support studies that have found that teacher expectations influenced the self-perception of students and their actual ability. The purpose of their study "was to examine the effects of teachers' beliefs about students' motivation and performance on their math and reading achievement in a sample of low-income, ethnic-minority middle school students" (Harvey et al., 2016, p. 511). The study asked three questions pertaining to teacher and student expectations. The authors wanted to determine if teacher bias about students' level of motivation would predict final math and English grades. They also hypothesized that teacher bias would be influenced by membership in particular ethnic-minority groups based on the school population. Lastly, they evaluated if there was a gender bias in the way teachers perceive student academic potential.

The researchers measured the difference between students' perceptions of their motivation and how teachers perceived the students. The results of the study found that the current study fills a gap in research about the effect of teacher bias on low-SES minority students. Additionally, this study did not focus on African American students within White schools, but rather on African American students within a predominantly Latino school. Not only did teacher expectations and bias impact student motivation, they also impacted student grades. There was no gender difference when looking at the impact of grades. This study has a direct link to future studies that should focus on the

impact of teacher bias on minority students as well as if certain populations benefit from this bias over time.

Whitaker et al. (2011) sought to determine if there was a link between family, neighborhood environment, and learning motivation in school-aged African American youth. The authors found that the factor of African American students with parents who have strong parent management styles, parent involvement, and support was found to negate a disadvantaged neighborhood (Whitaker et al., 2011). More specifically African American students with strong parent support showed evidence of maintaining student motivation in school despite economic challenges (Whitaker et al., 2011). The study supported prior research (Cassidy & Lynn, 1991; Klebanov et al., 1997; Sampson, 2001) which found that academic motivation and effective school functioning can occur when there is strong parental involvement. The researchers noted that future research would benefit from including self-report measures on parent education, peer interactions, and family functioning (Whitaker et al., 2011). Although the Whitaker et al. study found a link between parent involvement and student motivation, the results indicate that future research should focus on targeted interventions for families. These results may oppose the theory that school instruction can only be worked on through school and not the external environment, similar to the behaviorist perspective that altering a person's environment will alter other areas of their life to include school and academic functioning (Cohen, 1999).

Another study conducted by Cooper and Davis (2015) found that African American high school students have the motivation to excel in school especially when paired with supportive family and peer associations. This study challenged prior research

(Ford & Grantham, 2003; Garcia & Guerra, 2004) on the achievement gap that placed blame on the student and their family as the reason for their lower performance using the deficit-oriented theory (Cooper & Davis, 2015). In this quantitative study, 1,322 African American high school students in California were surveyed about their future aspirations and motivations. Positive peer support along with strong family expectations about schooling had a greater impact on African American urban high school students' motivation in high school and in postsecondary settings. When the data were broken down by gender, the authors found differences between how family expectations impacted males and females. These data support the authors' premise that African American students should not be grouped into one setting in order to determine if they are motivated to learn. Future research should focus on understanding the lived experiences of both males and females. The results found that the majority of African American families who participated in the study had expectations for their children to graduate high school and attend college. According to Cooper and Davis, the next step is to explore why these aspirations do not coincide with the actual number of students who enroll in college in California.

Student Voices in Literature

Many adults feel invaded by children. Adults are not always willing to welcome what the culture of childhood has to say. Some adults feel that they are seeking to allow children to have a voice that is more important than the adult voice. This shows that adults and children still do not know each other. It is not about who is more important, but rather the equity of visibility of views and opinions (Harcourt et al., 2011, p. 34).

Past and recent literature on including the voices of children echoes the statement above (Alvermann et al., 1996; Erickson & Schultz, 1992; Harcourt et al., 2011; Saldana, 2000; Stevenson, 1990). Student voice refers to the ability of students to express their thoughts and feelings about situations that impact them. According to Sasha Pleasance (2016), the movement to include student voices is not authentic and is being used advance the needs of organizations. This type of tokenism has led to more research focused on understanding how including student voice in research has had a positive impact on marginalized student populations (Gonzalez et al., 2016). Student voices have often not been included in topics that specifically related to their success and well-being. Student voice connects to the theoretical framework of critical race theory and culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000; Howard, 2008).

Theoretical framework refers to supporting or expanding on a current educational theory in order to understand the phenomena under study, and in terms of finding research, this has implications for race and perception. Instruction that is culturally relevant also includes student perception of the instruction because students are part of the instruction cycle. According to Ladson-Billings (1995b), culturally relevant instruction involves understanding the needs of the population being taught in terms of finding research that has implications for race and perception. The major tenet of this research study involves the idea that student voices, African American male voices, are not included in much of the research, which is one of the major reasons why this study is unique and seeks to fill the gap in the literature (Alvermann et al., 1996; Erickson & Schultz, 1992; Saldana, 2000; Stevenson, 1990). Additionally, a comparison of the

voices of African American males who are achieving at their grade level standard with African American males who are not achieving to standard is missing from the literature.

Randy Lattimore (2005) conducted a study using two African American male students and their experience and opinions of the teacher practices that contribute to helping African American students achieve success in the math classroom. Lattimore found that "listening to African American students' voices is essential in identifying those vital teaching and learning environments that contribute to African American students succeeding in mathematics" (p. 140). The two African American male students were observed and participated in interviews with the researcher. The results of Lattimore's study found that both students described how teachers do not make math relevant and/or interesting to students. Common themes were developed from triangulating the data. Lattimore had the students describe in their own words the best way to reach them as African American male students. Lattimore termed the overall theme as "channeling African American male energy" (p. 271). The study confirmed that there is a relationship between valuing student voices and educational outcomes (Lattimore, 2005). The policy implications are that student voices need to be included in the discussion of how best to instruct African American students and that there is a void in the literature with regard to student voices.

Student Identity

Emmanuel Levinas related the struggle to survive to the struggle to remain in being (as cited in Moran, 2000, p. 344). Levinas explained that "the struggle for being is the struggle to maintain identity. Existence is identity" (as cited in Moran, 2000, p. 344). This is powerful when related to students in classes who are often struggling to be seen

and/or heard. It is not likely that a student that feels marginalized or forgotten in class will feel a strong sense of identity as a student. They may have two personas. African American children in particular are often dealing with two or more personas. One theory titled "double consciousness" by W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) suggests that African Americans have to live three lives: one for the mainstream culture, one for the minority culture, and one for the black culture (as cited in Boykin, 1986). This identity of a student is mainly constructed from the biased point of view of the dominant American culture, in this case, the White dominant culture, which has distorted the African American experience (Baldwin & Bell, 1985). This section reviews research related to student identity.

A study by Warikoo et al. (2016) explored how student racial identity impacts racial equality or inequality in academic settings. Warikoo et al. defined implicit racial associations as "the automatic cognitive associations people have between a given social group and certain feelings, concepts, and evaluations" (p. 508). The authors highlighted a dichotomy between educational research and social psychology research in relation to student–teacher racial perceptions. The authors suggested that future studies collaborate between the two disciplines to gain a better understanding of how implicit associations at the cognitive level impact how students function within a school. The study focused on the historical K-12 population's understanding of how racial bias impacts students.

Warikoo et al. (2016) suggested that more research is needed to address implicit racial associations and a student's identity or sense of belonging. Additionally, the majority of research the authors found focused on White and Black students. More research should look at the interactions between all minority groups. Future research

could also look at a potential link between restorative justice and reducing racial bias in high-need schools.

Byrd and Chavous' (2011) study focused on how racial identity is a positive predictor of academic motivation and success in African American youth. Their study also sought to fill the void in the literature about the role youth's context plays in racial identity. Byrd and Chavous specifically focused on determining if a relationship exists between "youths' racial identity beliefs and the meanings associated with race in their environments" (p. 850). The sample for this study was 263 African American 11th graders in Maryland. The students were given surveys on school intrinsic motivation, racial identity, school racial climate, and school belonging. The authors found that racial identity context congruence did have a direct relationship with motivation. This means that youth who had a higher perception or regard for themselves as African Americans within their school and community tended to have positive effects on their intrinsic motivation. This study lends itself to understanding the importance of studying the thoughts and feelings of the youth as well as studying the racial climate in schools.

In a more recent study conducted by Joshua Ventura (2016), the power of racial identity within African American adolescents was found to be a positive indicator of peer racial socialization. Ventura hypothesized that studying African American adolescents from their own perspective instead of looking at the familial relationship would show the actual racial socialization of African American youth. The sample size included African American youth between the ages of 12 and 20. Each participant completed questions on racial socialization, an inventory of Black identity, and adaptive learning scales (Ventura, 2016). The results indicate that African American youth share positive racial

socialization messages which in turn have a positive effect on academic functioning. This topic is relevant to the current study's questions that focused on identifying factors that improve academic functioning.

Summary

Chapter two contained several areas of research directly related to the current study's questions about factors that impact African American male academic success. The literature review examined the historical barriers to achievement in African American males as well as the implications for schools to learn from the voices of African American male students. Through the lens of critical race theory and culturally responsive teaching, the literature identifies how exploring motivation, identifying academic attitudes, and determining the relationship between identity and learning can have an impact on African American male students. Based on the limited research on the voices of African American male students, one can conclude that academic motivation can be improved through an understanding of how to teach them as told by them. Chapter two presented information on the historical impact of race that supported the current research study's hypothesis that African American males' motivation is linked to instruction and academic attitudes. This literature review supported the possible themes that may emerge through the analysis of the students' lived experiences. Chapter three will focus on the methodology of this phenomenological case study. Specifically, in Chapter three, the purpose of the study, the method and design, sample, data collection procedures, and data analysis will be discussed.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to allow students to make meaning and understand their positionality within an academic setting while providing teachers and instructional staff with insight into the personal experiences of African American male students within the context of eligibility. Each individual had a different perspective based on class, culture, age, religion, and environment among other factors. The individual differences impacted the students' and my own construction of meaning.

This chapter is organized as follows: (a) guiding research questions, (b) research design, (c) the justification for using a qualitative methodology, (d) and data analysis. Specifically, the phenomenological method is described in detail as well as my role as researcher and positionality within the study. The design, selection process, and procedures are clearly defined in this chapter.

Research Questions

This qualitative phenomenological research study was guided by two questions that seek to determine how African American males identify successful academic instruction. This study was guided by two research questions related to African American male adolescent achievement in middle school.

RQ1: How do African American male middle school students experience and understand what it means to be a student?

RQ2: What are the instructional implications for teaching African American male middle school students based on their lived experiences?

Research Design

"Qualitative research proposals must begin the research with a clear direction but with the anticipation that as data gathering and analysis proceed, the questions, methods, design, and participants may all shift somewhat" (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 50).

Oestmann (2016) stated that "phenomenological studies tend to be highly descriptive and the researcher attempts to derive the 'essence' of an experience by utilizing lengthy interviews with individuals who have experienced the phenomenon of interest" (para. 5). For the purpose of better understanding the lived experiences of African American males and academic eligibility to participate in activities based on grade point average, phenomenology provides an "in-depth exploration of human action and experience, as well as the meaning that human beings make as a result" (Saunders, 2007, p. 72).

While investigating meaning or construction around the topic of African American male eligibility, this research served as an opportunity to give a voice to the African American male students so that ultimately the students were able to explore the context of their individual academic performance while allowing me to interpret a phenomenon that is grounded in the lived experiences of the participants (Gibson, 2008). According to Morgan (2011), existential-hermeneutic-phenomenological research is a type of research that uses real world experience to delve deeper into an observed phenomenon. By applying descriptions that explore the same phenomenon across a variety of settings with more than one individual, the researcher can identify a pattern that describes how lived events are experienced (Morgan, 2011). This allows the inside action researcher to focus on a group of students who have been marginalized to create

theory based on interpretation of individual narratives and experiences (Gibson, 2008).

Quantitative research would have allowed a larger group of participants to participate in

the study, but the individual voices and feelings of those students would not have been

heard through the use of surveys or a compilation of data sources alone.

Phenomenological Research

Phenomenological design is a form of qualitative methodology. According to

Van Manen (2011), the main purpose of the phenomenological method is to explore lived

experiences by using narrative methods, interviews, or observations in order to better

describe and understand experiential personal accounts. Using phenomenological

research should include four components (Van Manen, 2011). These four components

are the reason why the phenomenological method was chosen for the current research.

The first component states that the research must center around a wonder about a

phenomenon (Van Manen, 2011). The current study sought to understand why and how

African American males are eligible or ineligible. The second component is that research

must involve exploring lived experience (Van Manen, 2011). For this study, the lived

experiences of African American male students were explored. The third component

seeks understanding of the phenomenon through description of otherness or what it is like

to experience the phenomenon as another (Van Manen, 2011). African American males

who are seen as "others" were allowed to describe their personal experience. Finally, the

research should end with an understanding, or *epoche*, also known as making others

aware of the phenomenon in order to encourage understanding (Van Manen, 2011). For

these reasons, the phenomenological method was appropriate for this study. There was a

phenomenon to be explored, yet I could not predetermine the outcome or even the actions

that may have been observed (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2002). Morgan (2011) defined phenomenology as "a style of thinking that comes from the Greek words phainoemn (appearance) and logos (letting be), which denotes the study of first-person experiences" (p. 1). This research was a phenomenological study as defined by Morgan where interpretation plays a major role in understanding the lived experiences of students. Whereas a descriptive case study focuses only on the rich description of the phenomenon under study without a need to formulate or establish a hypothesis, a phenomenological study delves deeper into the descriptive data collected and seeks to interpret or analyze the information gathered regarding the phenomenon under study. For this reason, case study was not chosen as the research method for the current study.

It is difficult to predict the findings prior to beginning a research study. It was my hope that the research would yield enough data to be able to theorize about the phenomenon. The students in the study were participants who also helped to guide the study, and as such, they determined the outcome. This is why a phenomenological study method was appropriate for this research. Existing theories such as critical race theory or cultural deficit theory focus on the performance of African American male students as reviewed in the literature review section. Critical race theory explores the relationship between schooling and inequality with race as an intersecting factor (Ladson-Billings, 2007). CRT posits that school systems are products of racial constructs which impact minority students (Ladson-Billings, 2007). The current study used CRT as a framework to explore whether there is a relationship between race, inequality, schooling, and achievement as measured by eligibility. One major component of this study was the documentation of students' thoughts and feelings through narrative storytelling.

Narrative and Phenomenology as a Method of Understanding Lived Experiences

Narrative inquiry is based on Dewey's theory of experience and taking a narrative turn as a way of understanding experience. For the purpose of the current study, narrative inquiry was not used as the methodology but as a way to capture the stories of the students. The students told their stories in a narrative manner through storytelling or journaling (Ellet, 2011). "It is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). Narrative storytelling allows an individual's experience in the world to be told through the study, in a format that allows for personal feelings to be disclosed (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2006). The narrative was used in a descriptive manner as a direct way of analyzing students' personal experience as they are living it. For the purposes of this research project, narrative storytelling was used as a tool within the framework of the phenomenological method to capture the experiences of the students through storytelling. Thus, the overarching methodology was phenomenological theory with the use of specific narrative tools. As an insider researcher using this methodology, it must be acknowledged that the role of researcher and facilitator allows direct access to interpret and make meaning from findings. Personal experience and perspective played a role in how trust and relationships were built as well as how the research was conducted.

Subjects and Selection

The current study had a sample size of five African American male middle school students aged 12–14. Students were selected from Montgomery County, Maryland and were public school students in Montgomery County Public Schools. This smaller sample size supported using the qualitative method rather than the quantitative method. Students

were selected based on their willingness to participate and based on how they describe themselves when asked about "being" a student. Additionally, purposive sampling was used for the current phenomenon under study (Chein, 1981; Patton, 1981). The goal of the phenomenological method is not to generalize to a larger part of the population, but rather to describe a specific phenomenon. As stated earlier, one component of phenomenology is to explore one phenomenon based on otherness. In this study, otherness was being an African American male student within an academic setting. As such, probabilistic sampling, or random sampling, was not a justifiable method to use for this qualitative research when compared to non-probabilistic sampling, which focuses on choosing subjects that will capture a smaller identified population of subjects. Chein (1981) and Patton (1981) both described purposive or purposeful sampling as selecting a sample based on the need to discover and gain insight (as cited in Merriam, 1988). Similarly, Goetz and LeCompte (1984) defined criterion-based sampling, another form of purposive sampling, as "a sampling that requires that one establish the criteria, bases, or standards necessary for the units to be included in the investigation; one then finds a sample that matches these criteria" (as cited in Merriam, 1988, p. 48). This aligns with the current study because selected students were required to fit the criterion listed below in order to isolate the phenomenon.

In the current study, a combination of quota selection and extreme case selection were utilized in order find students who met the three criteria stated below and to make comparisons between extremes such as eligible students versus ineligible students. Each of the participants were initially selected based on their GPA. Students were selected for the study based on (a) Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and

Careers (PARCC) scores; (b) ineligibility rate (as determined by a GPA of less than 2.0); (c) self-identification as an African American male willing to voluntarily participate; (d) evidence of learning readiness; and (e) Map-R/Map-M scores. In addition, report card grades and Map-R scores (an independent reading assessment) were used as information to determine whether a student's eligibility is consistent with their PARCC scores. These criteria were chosen because PARCC scores identify the student's grade level at the state level, and GPA, evidence of learning readiness, and Map-R/Map-M scores delineate academic performance at the school level. Both identifiers work in conjunction to determine the student's overall grade level performance.

I selected students based on the school's eligibility target rate. African American males consist of 31.9% of the total student population for a total of 264 out of 827 students. The actual school ineligibility rate for African American males is 25.8% (68 out of 264), well over the target rate of 12% as set by the school district.

The selected group of students participated based on eligible GPA status and race as well as ineligibility status, race, and willingness to participate. Only African American male students were selected from the core group. Once student names were selected, I engaged the students in conversation in order to determine the level of interest of each of the students. Approximately three ineligible students per grade level were selected based on level of interest surrounding understanding and describing why they are ineligible based on grades. Conversely, three eligible students per grade level described their experiences being eligible based on grades to allow for comparison and possible interpretation.

Instrumentation

The only instrumentation used for this study was interview questions as based on the phenomenology method which focuses on understanding lived experiences through the use of interviews, narrative storytelling, and observations (Van Manen, 2011). Interview questions were used during the initial interviews with students. The main strategy for data collection was interviews. In this dissertation study, I used in-depth interviewing as the primary means for data collection. Borrowing from Foster's (1997) research on African American teachers in which she relied on a set of topics to guide her interviews rather than a list of interview questions, the current study utilized a similar method. This method of interviewing is situated within the life history methodology and calls for a more conversational rather didactic style of interviewing (Dhunpath, 2000; Goodson, 2001). For this study, similar strategies were used, such as having students describe personal experiences through an oral format and situating each interview within a specific theme. Through three "conversations" (explained below), I documented participants' authentic personal narratives articulated from a first-person perspective.

For the participant interview questions (see Appendix A), I established dependability and validity by seeking qualitative judgments and recommendations from the doctoral education expert staff. All interviews were audio recorded as well as scripted to ensure validity of the recorded responses. Atlas.Ti software was used to assist with coding and managing textual data. The purpose of the software is to have one place to access all of the qualitative data collected via notes, observations, and recordings. Atlas.Ti has the capability to house all of the research documents in order to allow coding

of specific themes. The software has a variety of tools that allowed me to interact with the data in large segments or smaller segments.

<div align="center">**Process**</div>

Informed Consent and Confidentiality

For the current study, students and parents were invited via written consent form addressed to both the parent/guardian of the student as well as the student. The consent form stated that parents can withdraw consent at any time. The consent form also stated that students may withdraw consent at any time as well. Participants and parent/guardian were informed of the intent to audiotape. An assent script was read to participants regarding the research of minors. All participants were encouraged to ask me questions throughout the duration of the study and were informed that they may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. From the pool of approved student forms with parent/guardian consent, I selected the most and least eligible African American males in each grade level—sixth, seventh, and eighth—for a total of six cases. I met with each parent and student once selected to review the proposed procedures and obtain written consent with signatures.

Procedures for Data Collection

Data were collected through the use of field notes and narrative oral and/or written student responses through the use of interviews. Students were given the choice to respond either orally or in a journal. I encouraged any form of communication that promoted descriptive discussion of their experiences. It is important to note that data collection took place simultaneously with the initial data analysis. The components of the data collection were (a) individual interviews to include student review of classroom

observations of the student in academic setting and (b) focus groups in order to further clarify African American males' responses in their own voices.

The two research questions enabled me to use the interview data collection method. Each of the two questions relies on understanding the feelings and perceptions of what it is like to be an African American male student from the student's point of view. I collected the data through the use of interviews and focus groups. Specifically, for this research, I planned to begin by developing a relationship with students so that they felt safe to share their experiences as part of an individual interview process. A semi-structured interview was used for the individual student interviews. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 min. This format allowed me to present topics while giving the students space to explore the identified topics. All interviews were audio recorded as well as scripted to ensure validity of the recorded responses.

I also planned to use a focus group interview (Robson & McCartan, 2016). The focus group interview "is an open-ended group discussion which the researcher guides, typically extending over an hour or possibly two" (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 299). The method of choice was observing students within their natural school setting and allowing them to describe their experience as their words are recorded. It was also anticipated that this method would encourage more participation from students.

Participant Interview Overview

This dissertation study used in-depth interviewing as the primary means for data collection. As stated earlier, in this study I utilized Foster's (1997) research on African American teachers in which she relied on a set of topics to guide her interviews rather than a list of interview questions. This method of interviewing is situated within the life

history methodology and calls for a more conversational rather didactic style of interviewing (Dhunpath, 2000; Goodson, 2001). There are three stages used for life history interviewing. According to Gurbrium and Holsten (2002), the first stage is the preinterview stage. During this stage, the interviewer gathers background data and determines how best to approach interviewing the subject. The second stage is the process of interviewing, which focuses on how to guide the interviewee through the process of telling their life story. The last stage is the analysis stage, which involves transcribing and interpreting the interview material. For this study, I used the strategies of relating to self, family, interviews, and observations as well as situating each interview within a specific theme. Through three "conversations" (explained below), participants' authentic personal narratives articulated from a first-person perspective were documented.

Getting to Know You – First Round of Individual Interviews

The first round of interviews were conducted with the sole purpose of interviewing each individual participant to gather more data on the student's personal views about school and being eligible with a 2.0 GPA. Additionally, in order to determine their background and level of comfort with the research, interview questions and the research questions were shared with students using age-appropriate language and examples. I fleshed out any topics that related back to the research questions of understanding African American males' lived experiences as students as well as the instructional implications for teaching African American male students. Interview questions focused on how they felt they were doing in school as well as their perception of school.

In their own words, students described what factors they felt influenced their grades and their interest in learning. The initial individual interview was a data gathering tool and a starting point to determine the factors to further explore with the participants. The purpose of this was to triangulate the data amongst all of the student participants in order to see if any common themes emerged. Interviews, observations, and student narratives were all part of the triangulation process used in this phenomenological study. Each interview was approximately 60 to 90 min in length.

In addition, the interviews were recorded utilizing a speech-to-text system. All interviews were audio recorded as well as scripted to ensure validity of the recorded responses. A recording instrument tool for converting speech to text recorded and transcribed each participant's interview. By using speech to text, I was able to go back and pinpoint every word that was said. An audio recording was used as a third method for each interview to record responses. The location was a majority African American suburban middle school which includes sixth, seventh, and eighth grade classes. The interviews took place inside of my conference room office. The students were asked the questions below during the initial interview (see Appendix A).

What Do I See? – First Round of Observations

I conducted the first round of classroom observations. The teachers were notified of the first round of classroom observations and the students were informed that I was going to observe them, but did not necessarily know when they would be observed. Observations were done without a camera, but I scribed the actual experience. Class lessons were 46 min in length, and students were observed for the entire lesson. It was in the best interest of the study to be there from the beginning of the class until the end of

the class. The observation was a starting point to edit interview questions before conducting the interviews.

What are Your Thoughts? – Second Round of Interviews

Interview questions were distributed to each individual participant to complete during their individual interview. Students were interviewed individually after going over each question for clarity. All interviews were audio recorded as well as scripted to ensure validity of the recorded responses. After the interviews were completed, I looked at the data to determine if there were any emerging themes around self-perception, motivation, and student engagement.

Looking Glass – Second Round of Classroom Observations

The second round of classroom observations took place in a different academic class. I had data from the interviews that described the subjects in which students felt most successful and least successful. One observation occurred in each subject area.

It's Like Looking In a Mirror – Third Individual Interview

Students reviewed answers to the first interview as well as subsequent classroom observations. The entire interview focused on the students' perception of their interaction and performance in class. All interviews were audio recorded as well as scripted to ensure validity of the recorded responses. Due to the age group of students and their attention span, students were given a description of their observation to read based on areas of the classroom observation that needed clarification and that related to the topics that emerged during the initial interview.

For example, if something was analyzed from the classroom observation, students were shown a portion of the lesson and asked what was going on or what they were

thinking. Students could also explain what was going on during this portion of the lesson. The purpose of this was to observe and compare the student observations of themselves to my outsider observations of the students in the classroom. The hope is that the topics or the themes of engagement, motivation, self-perception of self, and outside perception would arise during the discussion of the observation and analysis of the classroom observation. This acted as a catalyst for the first focus group along with any other topics that emerged from the survey results.

Methodological Assumptions

Methodological assumptions refer to the characteristics inherent in the choice of design that guide everything from the choice of participants to interpretation of the data. Quantitative studies should include both a brief discussion of the philosophical assumptions underlying the choice of method and the implications inherent in that choice, providing a clear rationale for the student's methodological choice(s). Qualitative studies should discuss the value of a constructivist approach to understanding a phenomenon and the implications inherent in that choice, providing a clear rationale for the student's methodological choice(s). A mixed methods study should include both. Applied research with applications or interventions should include detailed rationale for the study and method. Van Manen (1990) explained, "The problem of phenomenological inquiry is not always that we know too little about the phenomenon we wish to investigate, but that we know too much" (p. 46). "Knowing too much" is a concern. Assumptions and preunderstandings needed to be bridled in order to deal with knowing too much. In order to limit researcher bias, subjects were chosen from a group of students who were not part

of my department. Limiting student selection to students who did not know me helped to prevent researcher bias.

Limitations

Leedy and Ormrod (2013) defined limitations as "those variables, constructs, or factors that are out of the control of the researcher" (para. 3). For the purpose of the current study, one limitation was whether student participants gave honest answers. Students may have felt concerned or felt pressure to respond a certain way if they knew that I also worked in the school district or school. Because this study involved human subjects, I was unable to determine with accuracy whether students would give honest answers or follow all of the procedures that were outlined. Another possible limitation was the size of the study. Using purposive sampling allowed me to select specific subjects for deep analysis. The drawback is that the research may be more difficult to generalize. Researcher bias may have played a role because I am part of the community being studied. Overall, the benefits of the study outweigh any possible weaknesses because the results can be used to impact change for instructional purposes.

Delimitations

According to Leedy and Ormrod (2013), delimitations "include such items as factors, constructs, and variables that would be intentionally left out of the study to allow for a more specific question or process to explore" (para. 5). The major delimitation of the current study was that only middle African American males aged 12–14 were targeted as the population. The purpose for the narrow age group was to better focus on the research questions and the impact on this age group. There were also time constraints involved with this qualitative research that required a more specific group of participants.

External validity may have been affected in that every option or process was not tested due to the needs of the study.

Data Processing and Analysis

Data analysis was divided into three phases due to the nature of the phenomenological methodology. The researcher does not know the end discoveries or even the final analysis (Merriam, 1988). The final analysis is the end result of simultaneous data collection and analysis. The purpose of Phase 1, data analysis, was to reduce the risk of missing possible themes due to the volume of the data, providing opportunities for links between students, offering guidance to me on the types of questions to ask, and maintaining data that are focused. Phase 1 began after the initial interviews were conducted and the debrief meeting was held to review and discuss student responses. I made notes and developed questions as they relate to the purpose of the study. I also added notes that reflected the data from notes and audio recordings.

At this point, initial themes emerged based on the survey findings. Once I completed the initial coding for themes, I used coding software to streamline the process. The surveys served as the first set of data that were later added to my case study database. The first focus group was used to review and discuss the data with the students. I sorted through the survey questions and group findings based on the four focus group areas: (a) self-reflection about their responses on the surveys, (b) student self-perception/identity in the student voice, (c) sense of belonging in school, and (d) negotiations in the classroom. This process continued with each data collection activity with the purpose of comparing the data sets and using the information to inform questions and to ultimately formulate answers to the research questions (Merriam, 2009). The second set of data to analyze

simultaneously was the initial student interviews. These interviews followed the same data mining process and then compared the student responses to each other in order to help determine the next set of questions. I based the questions for the student interviews on the student responses to the surveys. I mined the student responses for any words that were repeated and/or mentioned across student responses. I then developed a chart based on the use of high frequency words or themes with student names listed. Finally, I taped the observations of students in the academic class setting after the initial student interview.

I included open-ended questions about the classes students take and how they feel about each class. Student responses about their classes helped me to determine which class to observe. I selected the class based on my guiding questions and the need to understand the conditions that produce African American male students who thrive in an academic setting. I reviewed the observation notes and made notes on student demeanor, actions, work completion, attentiveness, and other descriptive action observed.

The observation notes were kept as additional data to ask questions. My questions were secondary to the narrative the students told while reviewing my notes. Students narrated their lived experience as they listened to the observation. I made notes about what students said while they were reflecting. Next, questions were asked after the interview if further clarification was needed. Students were given time to reflect on their observation either in writing or orally as a backup if they did not feel comfortable writing. The written reflection was reviewed in the same manner as stated before. The second focus group spoke to student videos and sense of self-perception as it relates to

the classroom observation they reviewed. Responses were transcribed and comparisons were made based on high frequency words and/or themes mentioned by the students.

The process continued with another focus group interview, followed by the student interview while watching the video, and then answering questions related to sense of school belonging. Students were asked to compare their first and second interview questions as well as describe their experience in narrative form. Time for reflection was given and the interview and video were analyzed in the same manner as before.

The next topic for the focus group was based on whether there was a need for more clarification or whether they were ready to move onto the topic of school belonging. The next video and interview focused on the topic of whether and how students negotiate actions in the classroom in relation to learning and being taught. These negotiations were expected to be made in more than one focus group based on my past pilot study within a classroom to identify reasons for lack of homework completion (Bryan, 2009). This reveals my possible bias as a researcher within the school setting. My experience with African American males at this school and the purpose of the current research relate to the topic of wanting to learn and to be taught about thriving and failing in the classroom. Awareness of this bias assisted me in conducting the study in a neutral manner. The final student interview discussed their feelings about what they have learned about themselves. Student responses were in narrative form. Emphasis was placed on the language the students used in telling their story (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996). I made note of physical reactions to the videos or questions as well as words and body language as the students told their stories.

The process of initial analysis met the suggestions laid out by Bogdan and Biklen (2003), such as narrowing the study based on the data, full descriptive versus theory generating, developing questions, making notes as data is collected, generating possible themes, noticing any analogies, and visualizing the phenomenon. At some point, data collection needs to end, although in a qualitative case study, the collection and analysis process can be ongoing. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified four ideal criteria to cease collecting data: exhaustion of sources, emergence of regularities, saturation of categories, and overextension. In the real world, ideal criteria may be outweighed by simply running out of time and money to conduct the study.

During Phase 2, I conducted a more intensive analysis to make better sense of the data (Merriam, 1998). Transcripts were coded openly in order to make meaning from the discussions and categorize concepts into similar themes. Both the participants and I listened to the audio. Data collection and analysis occurred at the same time, which led the research from one step to the next. The process of data analysis was a cycle. Data were collected, and then I followed the lead of the participants, which led back to collecting more data and then analyzing the data again. I set an end point for data collection, but the analysis continued even after the data were collected. In order to analyze the data, I created a case study database as described by Yin (1984) by gathering interview transcripts, field notes, student narrative journals, and/or audio. I identified units of data that would potentially lead to defining categories (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I also referred to the initial Phase 1 units of data taken from or about the interviews, student narratives, surveys, and focus groups.

The purpose was to group notes, comments, or phrases that went together. The student participants helped to identify the names of the categories based on the discussion during the groups. For this study, categorical names were created either by the student participants or myself. Data were linked to the category by following the same process stated in Phase 1. Data were then linked with subthemes coming from the category and linked using triangulation.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

The aim of this chapter is to share the findings from the voices of five Black male seventh and eighth grade students. The results from the research seek to provide further understanding of factors that contribute to Black male student achievement. Specifically, the results are centered around the following research questions:

1. How do African American male middle school students experience and understand what it means to be a student?

2. What are the instructional implications for teaching African American male middle school students based on their lived experience?

The major purpose of this study was to allow students to make meaning and understand their positionality within an academic setting while providing teachers and instructional staff with insight into the personal experiences of African American middle school male students within the context of eligibility. The study sought to determine how student narratives provide a voice and additional information about the internal and external influences that motivate them to success in academic settings. A Maryland state task force was created to address the continuing concerns surrounding African American male achievement. Specifically, the concerns addressed why African American males are continuing to perform at lower academic levels than their same-age non-African American peers. This study described the experiences of Black males in middle school from their point of view. I intended this study to be instructive. The work of the task force summarized above can be instructive as it informs scholars of African American male achievement about the need for research that examines the nonquantifiable

influences on African American male student academic success in ways that may complicate the process of root cause analysis.

Previous studies on Black male achievement have emphasized the need for relationships between teachers and students (Adams-King, 2016; Koppie, 2017). The research has continued to exclude the voices of the actual students being researched (Koppie, 2017; Marshall, 2016). More studies have focused on the perspective of the teacher and not the student perspective (Aker, 2016; Marshall, 2016). Specifically, the current research sought to fill that void (Parker, 2018). Qualitative data collection is a form of research that allows for study of the actual interactions between the students and their academic environments. In the present study, I chose to examine the factors that impact a small representation of middle school Black males, aged 12–14, in their middle school academic classes. I sent out parent requests to have 20 students participate in the current research. The 20 students had to meet the criteria of Black male, grade level scores on state or district assessments, and below a 2.0 grade point average. Initially, I requested African American males, but there were not enough African Americans (parents and students born in the United States).

As a result, I adjusted the term from African American male to Black male. Black male in this study refers to students of African descent whose parents were either born in the United States or an African country. This allowed for the identification of 15 Black male seventh and eighth grade students. The parents of the 15 students and the students themselves were contacted to determine consent. Out of the 15 parents, five parents gave consent for their child to participate in the study. Three students were in the seventh grade and two were in the eighth grade. There were no sixth-grade students

whose parents gave permission to participate. As a result, the actual research was conducted with only seventh and eighth grade students. All five students met the criteria of having on-grade level or advanced state assessments while having less than a 2.0 GPA. The students are listed below in the table. The GPA listed is for the second quarter in January 2019. The state assessment score listed is for the school year 2018–2019. *Proficient*, as used in the table, refers to the student being grade level or higher on state assessments. Due to confidentiality restrictions in the county where the school is located, I was not provided with a specific GPA per student. The students did meet the criteria of having less than a 2.0 GPA for the second quarter. I allowed students to choose one preferred and one nonpreferred class for me to observe. This was a change from my initial request to observe the students across multiple settings in school. As a result, the current study focused on two classroom observations (preferred and nonpreferred class), an initial introduction interview, and two interviews with classroom observation debriefs.

Table 1

Participants

Participants' pseudonym	Age	GPA	State Assessment Score
John Ambridge	12	<2.0	Proficient in Math/English
Helly	12	<2.0	Proficient in Math/English
Jack O'Ryan	12	<2.0	Proficient in Math/English
Max	13	<2.0	Proficient in Math/English
Lorenzo	13	<2.0	Proficient in Math/English

Student Findings

The figure below identifies the four themes which emerged from the interviews.

Figure 1

Themes in Student Findings

Theme 1	"Teachers make assumptions."
Theme 2	"There's more than one way to do things."
Theme 3	"We are not just robots, we are real people." – Engaging and interactive
Theme 4	"They don't get to know me, so I don't know them."
Theme 5	Validation

I used a phenomenological and narrative approach to collect and identify themes in the data to provide answers to the research questions. As this was a study driven by the student narrative, the themes that emerged speak specifically to the needs of Black male middle school students as described by the students themselves and observed by me. The data sources that were used to identify the following themes were classroom observations, preferred class and nonpreferred class, as well as two individual student interviews. Due to restrictions by the school, group interviews did not occur. I coded the student interviews, observations, and researcher notes to identify common themes amongst the students.

Theme 1: Teachers Make Assumptions

The majority population perceives Black males in United States society as being aggressive, angry, or dangerous (Duncan, 2002). This perception transfers across age

groups to have an influence on the way educators perceive Black male students starting as early as elementary school (Noguera, 2003). The notion that teachers assume the worst of Black male students is a theme that arose in four out of the five participants. Specifically, student narratives noted concerns that teachers assumed they were misbehaving without having evidence that proved their assumption. Based on interviews, students substantiated the findings of prior research about negative perceptions towards Black students. This theme was highlighted when students discussed their nonpreferred class. I allowed students to choose one preferred and one nonpreferred class to observe. Their narrative statements brought the findings to light in their own words:

- "Sometimes you think teachers judge off looks." – Lorenzo

- "You know what I hate, teachers only get one side of the story." – Helly

- "Always hear both sides of the student before teachers make a judgment." – John

- " I had Dr. World Studies teacher last year. A new student is in class and the student was laughing, Dr. World Studies said, 'Don't pull a Max on us' (referencing the laughing), but I felt some kind of way about him saying that. I feel like he picks with you like he wants smoke, I don't want smoke but it's annoying. He has carried over his thoughts about me from last year." – Max

Observations also confirmed assumptions being made. The teacher heard someone whistling on the left side of the classroom. The teacher looked at the side that had John on it and called out his name to see if he was whistling. I noted that John was not the one whistling and the teacher did not ask any other students if they were whistling. During the class observation debrief, John said that he thought the teacher was annoyed with him because he does not always pay attention. He wished the teacher

would ask before assuming he did something.

Theme 2: There's More Than One Way To Do Things

The thought of utilizing more than one strategy or path to show mastery is not new in the education world. The Black boys in this study reported that they preferred the teachers who were more willing to be flexible in their approach to teaching, or who allowed different ways to show mastery. Specifically, in the classes the boys identified as preferred, I noted several opportunities for flexible learning opportunities. Out of the 10 classes observed, five were identified as preferred and five were identified as nonpreferred. I identified six opportunities in preferred classes when students were given the chance to decide on the method they would use to complete an assignment. Conversely, in the nonpreferred classes, I identified opportunities as told by all five students when flexibility would have helped them in class.

Preferred classes as identified by each participant:

- One math teacher told the class they could choose their partners as long as they followed the criteria on the board. Participant Lorenzo stated that he likes when the teacher gives him the opportunity to work with who he wants as long as he follows the rules.

- John stated that he appreciates when his science teacher makes an effort to give more than one option for an assignment. He knows that this is not always possible, but he likes the fact that the teacher tries. She acknowledges that all students don't learn the same. That makes him want to work for her.

- Jack identified two opportunities in his English class that made him feel that the teacher wants all students to do well. During the observation of his English class,

the teacher asked students to vote on the assignment they wanted to do. This elicited loud noises and applause. During the debrief interview, Jack said his classmates love that class because the teacher always lets them choose activities. During the same class, the teacher also let students choose the format they would use for their assignment, PowerPoint, or audio. Jack said that he has friends who like that class because they can do oral recordings instead of writing. Jack said the teacher knows some students have a hard time writing. He likes that about the teacher.

- In Helly's science class, he commented that he likes to watch the video before answering questions. This differed from most other students' chronology, answering questions as the video plays. His science teacher allows him the flexibility to choose how he wants to complete his assignment as long as it gets completed. Helly said he thinks the teacher also pairs stronger students with students who may need some help. He likes this because they are all able to help each other and the teacher does not make students feel bad.

- In Max's Algebra class, I observed that Max was allowed the option to choose between two different math groups. Max said that he has been talkative in the past, but he likes that the teacher still gives him a chance to choose groups sometimes. Max stated that the teacher does not hold grudges.

Theme 3: We Are Not Just Robots, We Are Real People

Across all participants, the voice of the participants continuously emphasized the need for teachers to see them as actual human beings, and not just robots who sit in a class to do as they are told (Max, debrief observation 1, February, 2019). Black boys in

this study want to be valued as contributors to the classroom with individual strengths and weaknesses. They do not want to be grouped into one monolithic group. On the contrary, the boys identified several examples in the preferred classes where the teacher engaged with students and allowed them to be themselves. Based on the interviews, the boys felt like the teachers in the nonpreferred classes focused more on treating them as the same type of student. When Black male students feel restricted in their ability to exercise their individuality, the teacher runs the risk of the Black student acting out to show his individuality that he feels is being smothered. One student, Max, stated,

> Teachers should make class more engaging and fun. So I'll pay more attention and actually do the work. For example, [in] one of our classes, the teacher asks our opinion and what they should do differently. We are not just robots, we are real people. That teacher appreciates my opinion enough to ask. Some teachers, the work they give us, they just grade it. I don't like math and I'm not that engaged. It's like they just want us to work, work with no interaction. (Max, debrief observation 1, February, 2019).

During this student's math class, he was observed getting off task during a 15-min period when students were supposed to work independently. Several observations were made across all five students regarding this theme. Based on the interviews, this theme was validated by the student participants:

- "It isn't hard to learn, it just depends on how the person teaching you teaches and their rationality. That means how they choose to run their class." – John
- "When you are learning something in class, it is most important that we have time to practice. Don't make the class boring, if it's boring it goes in one ear and out

the other. Don't just sit there and explain the work for the longest time with a

straight face. That bores me. Crack a joke, make learning more interactive,

moving around groups going outside." – Lorenzo

- "I am more unfocused in World Studies than in English. Most ppl [*sic*] think

  world studies teacher is boring and not as interesting as English. English teacher

  makes it more fun. World studies teachers, they could make it more visual and

  help students to make sure you understand it. He is patient with students, English

  teacher, he explains it to students and includes us in the discussion." – Jack

- "My world studies teacher gives me a chance to discuss orally before I start

  writing. I feel like he understands we don't all learn the same way." – Helly

Theme 4: They Don't Get to Know Me, So I Don't Know Them

Too often, teachers are told that students need to have a relationship with them in

order to create an environment for success. Studies have found a direct correlation to

building relationships with Black students and their academic success (Hernández et al.,

2017; Howard, 2002; Mason et al., 2017). This is a standard teaching practice that

continues to have to be reiterated to teaching staff who work with Black males. The boys

in this study repeated over and over their need and their want to have relationships with

their teachers. Analysis of student statements reveals this need for reciprocation

regarding relationships. These Black male students do not feel like they must get to know

their teacher if they think the teacher is not willing to do the same thing. They notice the

disparity in the relationships offered. The word *offered* was used by one of the students

to show there are some teachers who choose to open themselves up to form relationships

with some students while also choosing not to work on relationships with Black male students. The following statements describe their feelings in their voice:

- "You can see how she looks at me when I ask her questions. Yeah, sometimes my questions may be silly, but she never looks at the girls that way. It's like she doesn't like me and she does not even know me." – Helly

- "She's my favorite teacher. I think it makes a big difference because she's the first class of the day. It helps my aura. It makes me feel good. The English teacher develops a rapport with me and shows she cares, she notices me on days when I'm sad or down but she notices. She makes me feel like I'm designer clothing." – John

- "He has good relationships with students." – Max

- "Teacher is outgoing, fun, nice, and has a positive aura. This makes me want to get to know her and work with her." – Jack

- "They don't get to know me, so I don't know them. I'm not going to waste my time trying to get to know someone who acts like that. Then they wonder why." – Lorenzo

Their statements are powerful because they allow insight into their thought process. It is an authentic feeling to them to want to be seen, to want to be noticed, and to be made to feel like they are the designer clothing.

Theme 5: Validation

Initially, I found this theme a surprise. Across all class settings, all five participants exhibited strong confidence and personalities. During interview sessions, the boys voiced their need for validation. The observer noted several instances during

classroom observations that support this theme. The boys are all confident, but they want to know that others, namely teachers, see them as confident as well. They want teachers to acknowledge their shine, as one participant stated, while also being willing to notice the effort they give when they may struggle. Cherng and Halpin (2016) and Williams-Baugh (2016) both have studied this phenomenon. Students want personal attention or validation of their existence. In this context of this study, Black male students want to be seen and validated within a school system that has inherently racist systems and systemic oppression often perpetuated by the same teachers from whom they seek acceptance. Ladson-Billings (2011) described this well when she discussed "the love-hate relationship with Black males" (p. 9). She asserted:

> We see Black males as "problems" that our society must find ways to eradicate. We regularly determine them to be the root cause of most problems in school and society. We seem to hate their dress, their language and their effect. We hate that they challenge authority and command so much social power. While the society apparently loves them in narrow niches and specific slots—music, basketball, football, track—we seem less comfortable with them than in places like the National Honor Society, the debate team, or the computer lab. (p. 9)

This quote belies the constant struggle in so many classrooms filled with Black boys and teachers who do not look like them. The following statements describe the boys' voices and thoughts on being validated as well as seeing themselves in the school system.

- "The teacher is African American and one of the classes I like. I like having

teachers who are similar to me; that's why I mentioned he was African American." – Max

- "Sometimes I just want to get up and walk across the room for attention. I know the teacher will say something." – Lorenzo

- "I know you saw when I dropped my binder on the floor. It makes a loud noise. I like that because it makes the teacher look at me like what are you doing. If I don't do that, sometimes he won't say anything to me during class." – Jack

- "I think I know what I'm doing in class, but for some reason I can't move on to the next part of the assignment until I ask my teacher did I do it right. That makes me feel better. I like to hear him say yes you did it correctly." – Helly

- "I feel like I have to ask a lot of questions like in science class or she will think I'm not doing any work. I am working. I want her to know that but I think the way I let her know annoys her sometimes." – John

Classroom Observations

This study consisted of interviews with students as well as observations of their preferred and nonpreferred classes. The next part of the findings focuses on the alignment of my field notes to the themes produced by the student interviews. A review of the themes is as follows:

1. Teachers make assumptions

2. There's more than one way to do things

3. We are not robots, we are real people

4. They don't get to know me, so I don't know them

5. Validation

These five themes are the themes that were identified from the actual voices of the students. It was my role to follow the phenomena and focus meaning around the themes that emerged from student voices while also making connections to the problem currently under study. As stated in Chapter Two, the problem is to "consider the inextricable connection between a child's emotional well-being and his academic success; many topics are substantially influenced by the social context in which they occur" (State of Maryland, 2007, p. vi).

The themes identified by the students all confirm that there continues to be a need to connect a Black male student's emotional well-being with his academic achievement. These themes can all be situated within critical race theory and culturally responsive teaching as posited as part of the possible causes for the way Black male students feel in school. The next findings focus on the classroom observations and race theories that support the student-identified themes.

Critical Race Theory

According to a major tenet of CRT, there are structures in place in school systems that continue to perpetuate the achievement gap (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). When coding and analyzing both the interviews and classroom observations, observations were made to support the need for restructuring.

1. During my observation of 10 classes, five students, and 12 staff members (nine general education teachers, one special education teacher, and one paraeducator), only two staff members were Black. While being in the building frequently over a two-month span, there was a noticeable difference between the racial makeup of the staff versus that of the students. The research school site has a Black student

population of 53%. Only 33% of their staff is identified as Black, while 54% of

the staff is White. The next biggest student population are Hispanic students with

a population of 25%. White students only make up 6.8% of the population. This

would seem to be a simple structural change that the school system could make in

terms of hiring more Black staff members. One of the students in this study

specifically mentioned that having someone who looked like him made a

difference. This change is not simple to make. This would require school

systems to work in conjunction with high school and colleges to encourage more

Black males to go into the teaching profession. Doing this would show that the

school district and education programs at colleges were making a concerted effort

to restructure systems that are inherently racist. This observation aligns with the

theme of validation. The students notice when they have teachers that do not look

like them. The students noted that they feel more of a relationship or bond with

teachers who make connections. Getting to know them is also one of the themes

identified by students.

2. Another observation made while conducting research is that there is a limited

    amount of movement and talking allowed during class. One of the themes

    identified from the student voices is to allow more than one way to do things.

    This speaks to the notion that sitting in rows, having very little discussion, is the

    way to teach all students. The students in this study all explained why they like

    having more than one option. This practice would be a good practice not just for

    Black male students but for all students. This observation relates back to the start

    of education and how, in many ways, this method of structured seating, no

movement, and no talking has not evolved to address the needs of all students.

3. When reviewing the *School Site Safety and Security at a Glance Report*

    (Montgomery County, 2019), there is one noticeable piece of data that stands out

    in a school of 53% Black students, 23% Latino students, 12% Asian students, and

    7% White students. In 2019, the school had a relatively low amount of out-of-

    school suspensions. The concern is that out of 25 students suspended, all were

    Black students. There were no other students suspended. Out of the 25 Black

    students, 19 are designated as FARMS students, meaning they receive some level

    of free or reduced meal support. These data show that race and equity are areas of

    concern at this school site. This observation speaks to the theme identified about

    not making assumptions about students, especially Black students. The data

    suggest that only Black students are misbehaving. One can connect this data with

    the staff demographics and wonder if there is a connection as the students see it.

Culturally Responsive Teaching within Context of Observations

As referenced earlier, culturally responsive teaching involves more than just

showcasing a person of color in the classroom. Teachers must use effective strategies for

use with diverse student populations to include embracing cultural communication

techniques in class, inclusion of minority contributions, the use of personal experiences,

and communicating high expectations for all students through the use of rigorous

curriculum (Gay, 2000). In every classroom observation, teachers had multiple

representations of people of color in the field related to the subject on the walls. As

Geneva Gay (2000) stated, this is the minimal and often surface start to incorporating

culturally responsive teaching. In all 10 classrooms, it was evident that the school system and teachers discussed highlighting contributions from every race and religion. On average, in every classroom, there were a minimum of five pictures of people of different races, as well as quotes by different people of color on the walls. This speaks to the theme of validation and seeing people like myself.

The observations also exposed areas that need to be upgraded. One area aligns with the student-identified themes of students being real people and not robots as well as more than one way to do something. That area is embracing cultural communication techniques. According to the student interviews, they value their individualism. They want teachers to also value who they are as people and not expect every student to be the same. In each 45-min class observed, the Black male students involved in this study, as well as other male students in general, found ways to increase their ability to be in contact with one another. Over 10 classroom observations, the five Black male students were tallied an average of 10 times per class speaking to friends, getting out of their seat to see friends, walking across the room to gain teacher or friend attention, getting out of seat to see the teacher, and making eye contact. Some of these interactions were during teacher-designated movement times and some were during times when students were to be seated and not talking. These observations confirmed what the students said in their interviews. Students felt that if they wanted to move or talk, they were wrong or made to feel different. No direct bias was observed, but these observations align with many of the statements the students made.

Summary

When reflecting on my two research questions, the current study does further this area of research. Specifically, the one-on-one interviews allowed for students to share their own personal narratives of what their experience is like as a Black male middle school student, which answers the first research question. Based on the results of the study, Black male students do not want assumptions to be made about them and also want to be treated with respect in order to give respect.

Additionally, the students shared the importance of valuing them as individuals and not as a homogenous group that acts, thinks, and talks the same way. Another important finding that is directly related to the constructs of race and equality in schooling is the boys' need to have teachers who look like them. This stood out as part of what makes their experience as Black male students relevant in the context of this study. The boys gave vulnerable descriptions using their words to give voice to a consistent problem in America's schooling system. The need for Black teachers, and Black male teachers specifically, continues to be an area that school systems must address. The ability to have their voices heard was a major reason the young men gave for wanting to participate in the study. They hope that teachers will learn from things they said to help all students.

Having their voices heard gave them more confidence each time they spoke. Every comment about feeling validated through teachers who look like them or who value them was always followed up by building relationships. Each student was clear in making a distinction between the traits of preferred teachers as opposed to those of nonpreferred teachers. Relationships came in second only behind feeling validated and valued. The results of this study help to answer the second research question regarding

instructional implications for teaching Black male students. There are several

instructional implications, mostly related to race and equity in schooling, that were

identified from the voices of the students as well as the use of the observations.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Discussion and Limitations

The current study sought to answer two research questions regarding the experience of being a Black male middle school student as well as instructional implications for teaching Black males. It should be noted that the terms African American and Black are used interchangeably in this study due to the limitation of the student participant pool at the selected school site. The term had to be broadened to Black and not just African American while also acknowledging that Black students have the overall same negative perceptions regardless of family origins. In order to find answers to these questions, Chapter one introduced the current problem statement and the impact on Black male schooling. In the state where I reside and work as a teacher practitioner, a task force was convened to research the reasons for the disparity in academic progress with Black male students.

After reading the study, I noticed there was a significant gap in research related to the actual voices of Black male students in the state of Maryland. As a result, I determined that a phenomenological study would be the best approach to capture the voices and overall experience of what it was like to be a Black middle school male student. Based on research conducted by Kunjufu (2013), the significance of this study materialized around the notion that there continues to be a disconnect between Black male students and the teachers who teach them. The discovery about this disconnect led to the formulation of the two research questions. Additionally, constructing theory based on using student narratives provided a voice and additional information about the internal

and external influences that motivate them to succeed in academic settings, lending credence to the significance of the study.

Chapter two of this study helped to lay the foundation for theories and gaps in the research related to Black male students giving their own narrative experiences about being a student. The literature review began by giving an in-depth exploration of phenomenology and the meaning associated with exploring narratives. The theoretical underpinnings were also identified and analyzed relative to critical race theory. Specifically, this chapter focused on exploring the evolution of Black education in the American school system. From there, the research focused on how systemic racism in schooling continues to be a leading factor in the inequities that exist with Black students.

Understanding culturally responsive teaching and how to teach diverse populations highlights the need for continued research in those areas. The literature review also focused on teachers' perceptions of Black students and how Black students perceived themselves in the context of schooling. The literature mostly found that teachers continue to have negative perceptions of Black students while Black students need to have connections to the school in order to perceive school in a positive manner. The literature review also encompassed Black male student voices and their feelings towards academic experiences. This part of the literature was not as vast as the research that focused on talking about the problem. There is much less research coming from the point of view of the actual Black male student.

Chapter three focused on the methodology and process that were used to collect data for the study. This chapter reviewed the guiding research questions, research design, the justification for using a qualitative methodology, and data analysis. Specifically, the

phenomenological method was described in detail as well as my role as researcher and positionality within the study. The design, selection process, and procedures were clearly defined in this chapter. The use of narrative inquiry situated within the context of the phenomenological study was described in great detail. Chapter four provided the results of the study. This chapter explained the process used to select the school site and student participants. There were several limitations that caused me to readjust the study. Specifically, I initially sought to conduct the study at the school where I taught. Due to student confidentiality and acknowledgement of possible power from one's position at the school, my school district does not allow individuals to conduct research at the school at which they work. During the student selection process, I had to adjust the terms African American to Black in order to create a larger selection pool of candidates. Once the data were collected, the data were coded for themes. This resulted in five themes that answered the research questions about what students experience as Black male middle school students and instructional implications.

Conclusions

Different conclusions can be drawn based on the results of the study and how these findings interact with the research questions and hypotheses. The first conclusion that can be drawn is that Black students need to have a greater opportunity to voice what impacts them, both negatively and positively. Another conclusion that can be drawn is that the demographics of the teaching staff do have an impact on student perception of schooling and may have an impact on their academic performance. Students noted that they want to feel valued for their individual traits but also want teachers to notice their efforts. The inference that can be made is that teachers do not make enough of an effort

to get to know their students in order to appreciate their strengths. In one of the student's words, "They want to be made to feel like they are designer clothing" (John, interview, 2019). Due to time restrictions placed on me at the school site, the interviews were much shorter than originally expected. This may have impacted the amount of data that were collected. If there had been more time to discuss with the students, there may have been a clearer path to the needs of the students as well as instructional implications.

Recommendations

The current study sought to fill the gap in the research with regard to including the voices of Black male students about their schooling experience. This research is just the beginning of the need for additional studies that should focus on the needs of Black male students from their point of view. A more thorough narrative research study that looks at both teacher perceptions and student perceptions is a recommendation for future research. Having the ability to analyze teacher themes and student themes to compare for alignment or disconnect would be invaluable to moving instructional practices forward. Using a smaller case size has pros and cons.

I would recommend having a slightly larger participant pool as long as there are one-on-one sessions with students. The one-on-one sessions elicited the greatest amount of data related to student personal experience. It is also recommended that school districts have open and honest discussions about the impact of having more teachers of color to whom students can relate. This would require creating partnerships with local area high schools and creating a pathway from high school to college to school district. It would be beneficial to create scholarships for this pathway to incentivize more Black men to become teachers.

Additionally, it is important to align Black student voice research with schools of education at the university level in order to justify the need to embed critical race theory and culturally responsive teaching into Teacher Ed programs. Adjusting teacher education programs will help to address the foundation for systemic inequalities that started generations ago, but continue to exist and impact Black students today, while planning to break the ongoing systemic oppression in schools.

Another recommendation that would be a slightly different area of study is to delve deeper into the reasons for disproportionate suspensions of Black males. Extensive research has been conducted on the school-to-jail pipeline, but not from the point of view of the actual student. This study has given me renewed hope that there are ways to involve Black male students in the education system and have them succeed.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Student Interview Questions

APPENDIX A

Student Interview Questions

By completing and submitting this survey, you are giving your consent for the principal investigator to include your responses in his/her data analysis. Your participation in this research study is strictly voluntary, and you may choose not to participate without fear of penalty or any negative consequences. Individual responses will be treated confidentially. No individually identifiable information will be disclosed or published, and all results will be presented as aggregate, summary data. If you wish, you may request a copy of the results of this research study by writing to the principal investigator at Augustina_L_Bryan@mcpsmd.org.

1. How old are you?

2. What grade are you in?

3. Tell me about yourself.

4. Describe what it means to be a student.

5. How would you describe yourself as a student?

6. As a student, describe what learning looks like to you.

7. How do you feel when you are learning? If you had to describe what learning looks like what would you say?

8. Talk to me about your interactions in class. How do you interact with your peers during class?

9. How do you interact with your teacher during class?

10. If you were new to a class, what would you want to tell the teacher about how you learn best?

11. Describe what makes learning hard. What does that look like to you?

12. When you are learning something in class, describe what is most important to you.

13. Tell me some things that help you learn in class. What would that look like?

14. How would you define "doing well"? What does that look like to you?

15. Do you think you are doing well or doing a good job in school?