

AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES, WHO ATTENDED URBAN HIGH SCHOOLS,  
CONCERNING THEIR ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN NORTH CAROLINA:  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Jermaine Lee Porter

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of the proposed hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of African American males, who formerly attended urban high schools, concerning their academic achievement in North Carolina. The theory guiding this study is the social equity theory (SET) as it describes the lens to view the racial-ethnic academic achievement gaps and explains what occurs when multiple factors create group differences in school readiness and achievement. The research methodology used in this study was the qualitative phenomenological method. A questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group were used to gather data on the participants' perspectives and lived experiences. The semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews both were recorded and transcribed. Participants indicated that classroom experiences impacted their academic achievement both positively and negatively experiences in the classroom. Participants shared that because they were African American males the expectations for them to be academically successful was lower than that of their White peers. Participants expressed the relationships they forged with school staff, friends, and family as beneficial to their school experiences. Participants acknowledged that their experiences outside of the classroom impacted their academic achievement. Participants also acknowledged academic achievement was not only impacted in the school building, but outside of school as well.

*Keywords:* academic achievement, academic achievement gap, direct influences, signal influences

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## Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to God, who has ordered my steps through this process. I give him all the glory!

To my parents, Bishop JV and Nora Porter who ensured I had a good academic foundation and always believed in me. Their prayers helped me get to where I am today. I have been blessed to have parents who love me, but more importantly, love God.

To the memory of my niece Camari Porter, and nephew Justin Porter, your lives were cut short before you were able to realize what God planned for your life. Uncle “Maine” loves you and is grateful for the time God allowed me to spend with you.

To my brothers Camartrus, Corvalandus, and Jeremicus who always believed in my abilities to earn a doctorate and always were there for me during this process.

To my only begotten son, Jermaine William Lee Porter, may this dissertation be something that will help you achieve academic success, and may you pursue knowledge throughout your life. Daddy Loves you!

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### **List of Abbreviations**

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Social Equity Theory (SET)

Durham Public School (DPS)

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Overview

African-American males are historically seen as a high-risk demographic in American education (Rhoden, 2017). African-American males are already at a disadvantage before attending a school or classroom, and many struggle with interpersonal conflict, which prevents them from flourishing (Hawkins-Jones & Reeves, 2020). A considerable proportion of African-American males fail out of high school and are or have been in the prison system or gangs (Ferguson, 2020). The public school systems have been seeking to answer the question of how to better educate African American male students since the civil rights case of *Brown v. Education Board of Topeka Kansas* (1954), which eliminated the notion of a 'separate but equal' case in civil rights. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of African American males, who attended urban high schools, concerning their academic achievement in North Carolina. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), a phenomenological study evaluates and explores a specific phenomenon that a heterogeneous group experiences, which is perfectly suited for the sample population. While the topic of African-American males has been researched, there are gaps in the literature for research on African-American males' perspectives and lived experiences, concerning their academic achievement in North Carolina.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of this study. The chapter will consist of the background, problem statement, purpose statement, significance of the study, and research questions. In addition to definitions of terms that were discussed to provide the reader with clarity.

## Background

This section contains a summary of the most relevant literature for the research to be conducted. It will also provide the historical, social, and theoretical context for the academic achievement gap among African-American males and their peers. This section will give a firm foundation for the research.

### Historical Context

Throughout the 1800s, the United States was segregated by race in all institutions, including public education. (Woglom, 2018). Although this inequity was challenged in court in 1896 the U. S. Supreme Court ruled in *Plessy v. Ferguson* to codify the constitutional doctrine of separate railroad coaches for the races, separate waiting rooms in railroad and bus stations, dual systems of public education, separate water fountains in public buildings, the rear seat of the bus for Negro passengers, and all the other trappings and signs of a caste system (Groves, 1951). Justice John Marshall Harlan, the lone dissenter in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, argued that forced segregation of the races stamped African American people with a badge of inferiority (National Archives and Records Administration). In 1954 in the case of *Brown V. The Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* the U.S. Supreme Court reviewed the history of public education since the ratification of the 14th Amendment, upon that basis they declared “separate but equal” legislation unconstitutional (Wolff, 2021). The decision in *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, led to significant changes being implemented in schools all over the United States (Mattheis, 2020). Despite the fact that the policy of "separate but equal" was declared unconstitutional decades ago, the academic achievement gap in school illustrates how the color line continues to divide us (Nathan, 2021).

Schools have a difficult task in ensuring the academic achievement of African-American males due to the intricacies of these students' backgrounds and experiences (Lowery, 2018). Between 2015- 2017, White students in the United States scored on average 27 points higher than African American students on standardized tests (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). The Black-White student's academic achievement gap was wider in 2015 (30 points) than in 1992 (24 points) (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). The data showed that the academic achievement gap is not closing, but continuing to widen. Paschall et al. (2018) asserted the academic achievement gap is the disparity in the academic achievement of primarily minority students in relation to their peers.

### **Social Context**

There are teachers who feel as though they do not see color and only see the students as individuals (Vue et al., 2017). They refer to themselves as “colorblind.” However, color blindness functions as a silencing mechanism, which mutes racialized experiences because there is no a space for those types of lived experiences (Vue et al., 2017). Yet, the Black-White academic achievement gap has been a central issue in educational policies, as well as in research for more than a decade. Closing the academic achievement gap became a priority of the federal education reform with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001(NCLB). Which enforced sanctions, such as the danger of losing federal funding, unless a state put in place a system of educational accountability that regularly tracked student progress by comparison groups (Goldhaber & Ozek 2019). Schools are required by NCLB to demonstrate performance improvements for various student subgroups, which are identified by the racial, linguistic, socioeconomic, and special education status of the students (Horn, 2018). U.S. cities are more segregated than they were 50 years ago as a consequence of demographic changes, leading to

hyper-segregation that makes students of color overrepresented in many urban schools (Horn, 2018).

As the racial academic achievement gap continues to grow, the trajectories of students are being impacted and their opportunities for success are being limited (Vue et al., 2017). Student dropout and graduation rates, college attendance, and college completion rates are all affected by the academic achievement gap. For parents, guardians, and caregivers the academic achievement gap may affect their socioeconomic status in the following way: The educational levels of parents, guardians, and caregivers have a significant impact on the educational outcomes of their children, which in turn affects their socioeconomic status (Ludeke et al., 2021).

### **Theoretical Context**

The academic achievement gap continues to widen (Paschall et al., 2018), despite the fact that there are theories devoted to closing the academic achievement gap specifically with African American males. The Ecological systems theory, created by Urie Bronfenbrenner in 1977 (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), discusses the importance of understanding parent, school, and communal support simultaneously and over time. Bronfenbrenner's philosophy is a theory of human development that states that individuals are impacted by multiple systems that are influenced by context, culture, and history (Darling, 2007). Bandura's (1977) social learning theory also discusses how behavior is learned by observation of modeled behavior and experiences and outcomes of behavior.

Motivation can play a vital role in the success of African American males. Ames and Wigfield et al., (2019) assert that motivation consists of ideas and beliefs that are connected to actions and behaviors. The self-determination theory is based on the interaction of internal and external factors that influence a student's motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1980). This is



differs from Zimmerman's (1989) socio-cognitive theory, which proposes that the goals students set for themselves are directly related to their motivation and academic achievement.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem related to this qualitative research study is the lack of academic success among African American male high school students, which is contributing to a widening academic achievement gap (Ellis et al., 2018, Koppie, 2017, Paschall et al., 2018). African American male students in the United States face a number of school, community, and home stresses that may lead to racial inequities in educational achievement (Walker, 2021). The education system aims for all students to be able to achieve academically on the same level. However, African American males are performing 27 points lower than their peers on standardized tests (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Academic achievement leads to students being able to graduate; nevertheless, in America, African American male students graduate at a considerably lower rate than White students (Koppie, 2017). Despite extensive research, the understanding of why the academic achievement gap exists is still limited (Paschall et al., 2018). Closing the racial academic achievement gap requires identifying and deploying the nation's finest knowledgeable, bold, and imaginative leadership in strategic political coalition at all levels of participation (Taylor et al., 2018). With race as a contributing factor to the academic achievement gap, the limitation of studies provides an opportunity to research factors that affect academic achievement of African American males in high school. The academic achievement gap in education refers to the disparity in academic performance between groups of students. The academic achievement gap shows up in grades, standardized-test scores, course selection, dropout rates, college-completion rates, and other success measures (Ansell, 2020). Although the academic achievement gap is used most often to describe the troubling academic performance

gaps between students from low-income families and those who are better off, it is also used to describe the differences in academic performance between African American students, who fall toward the lower end of the performance scale, and their White peers (Bowman et al, 2018).

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of African American males, who attended urban high schools, concerning their academic achievement in North Carolina. At this stage in the research, academic achievement will be generally defined the measure of student learning and level of mastery (Davis & Warner, 2018) The social equity theory (SET) (McKown, 2013) guides this study because it provides a lens through which to analyze racial-ethnic academic achievement gaps and explains what happens when many variables combine to generate group differences in school readiness and achievement.

### **Significance of the Study**

Equity is the state that would be achieved if race, gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and disability no longer predicted outcomes for students (Durham Public Schools, 2021). African American students in public schools in America often have significant disadvantages across all measures of academic attainment (Taylor et al.,2018). Being able to study the lived experiences of African American males and to understand their perceptions of the factors that affected their academic achievement would move the educational system to more equitable practices and potentially play a role in shortening the academic gap. This study has empirical, theoretical, and practical significance.

## **Empirical Significance**

African American students are a marginalized group in education, specifically African American males (Patton, 2015). In 2019, North Carolina Black students performed 32 points below their White peers and 19 points below the state average (N.C. Department of Instruction, 2019). Researchers have examined and determined that African American male students are struggling to find success in the American education system (Hawkins-Jones & Reeves, 2020). Having a greater understanding of the factors affecting African American male student academic achievement creates numerous benefits.

The researcher through this study will examine barriers that affect the perceptions and lived experiences of African American males, who attended urban high schools, concerning their academic achievement. Other studies focused on how biases impact the academic achievement gap of African American males (Solan, 2018; Cook & McIntosh, 2018; Egan, 2020). The gap in the literature exists in research that concludes that structural racism is the fundamental cause of the academic achievement gap and is the link of race to academic outcomes (Merolla & Jackson, 2019). Although extensively researched, the understanding of why the academic achievement gap exists is still limited (Paschall et al., 2018). The themes that will be produced in this research will contribute to the body of literature by recording the lived experiences and views of African American male students in an urban school system.

## **Theoretical Significance**

This study adds to the social equity theory by understanding the perceptions and lived experiences of the African American male students. By sharing the experiences of African American males in urban school districts who were affected by direct and signal influences shared in the social equity theory. It is important to broaden the inquiry of the students without

mounting theoretical non-specific search that provide few insights (McKown, 2013). The researcher through this study will look for evidence of effects from the home environment, community, and school culture that have a direct impact on academic achievement. Also, being able to gauge the social influences of the African American males are equally important. This study will broaden the social equity theory by exploring additional direct and social influences based on the shared lived experiences of the participants from an urban school district in North Carolina.

### **Practical Significance**

This study has the ability to enlighten urban neighborhoods, schools, and school districts, as well as educators and politicians, on the experiences of African American boys in high school. This research will provide insight into the lives of African American male high school students in an urban school district and how their experiences in public education impact academic success. From this study, the school district in North Carolina will be able to make education more equitable for African American males. The researcher goal in the study is to provide insight to parents, guardians, and caregivers and communities on ways they too can support African American males with their education. The goal of the study is that the findings could help educational leaders in identifying ways to support African American males support to be academically successful.

### **Research Questions**

#### **Central Research Question**

What are the perceptions and lived academic experiences of African American males, who attended urban high schools, concerning their academic achievement in North Carolina?

A student's academic achievement is measured by what the student learns and their level of mastery (Davis & Warner, 2018). Understanding the students' lived experiences is also important. Students' lived experiences are essential because learning is influenced by one's surroundings and daily interactions with people, practices, and objects (Hagenah & Thompson, 2021). Because of these lived experiences, the study will ask three sub-questions.

### **Sub-Question One**

What are the participants' perceptions of the factors that contributed to their academic achievement?

Many students have varying academic successes throughout school, such outcomes as achievement and performance are best predicted by variables measured in education (Guay & Bureau, 2018). It is important for educators to know what factors contributed African American males' academic achievement. Lower graduation rates, combined with lower academic success of students, highlights the need for of understanding the student experience to ground policy and practices (Kahu & Nelson, 2017).

### **Sub-Question Two**

How do the participants feel their race influenced their academic performance?

Merolla and Jackson (2019) asserted that racial disparities in most educational outcomes have remained essentially unchanged since the 1970s and continue to be one of the most important social problems facing the United States. The negative effects of race could potentially go beyond society, but also be a part of the educational system. It is important to understand the impact of race on our students.

### **Sub-Question Three**

How did a parent, guardian, or caregiver motivate the participants' academic performance?

The attitudes and expectations of parents, guardians, and caregivers make the difference in the academic achievement of their student. The expectations of the parents, guardians, and caregivers can be either positive or negative. Those expectations can and parental motivation has an impact on their child's academic achievement (Boonk et al., 2018).

### **Definitions**

1. *Academic Achievement*- the measure of student learning and level of mastery (Davis & Warner, 2018)
2. *Academic Achievement Gap*- The disparity in the academic achievement of primarily minority students in relation to their peers (Paschall et al., 2018)
3. *Direct Influences*- are social processes that promote academic achievement similarly for all children in all racial-ethnic groups (McKown, 2013)
4. *Epistemology*- generally refers to understanding in regard to cognitive success (Creswell & Poth, 2018)
5. *Social Equity Theory*- Social equity theory (SET) states that there are factors, which negatively impact the social-ethnic achievement gap (McKown, 2013).
6. *Signal Influences*- are social events that signal to members of negatively stereotyped groups that they are devalued because of their group membership (McKown, 2013)
7. *Transcendental Phenomenology*- is focused less on the interpretations of the researcher and more on the description of the experiences of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## Summary

The American public education system goal is for all students to have the same access to a sound education. For educators to develop successful practices, policies, and settings, they must first have a firm grasp on why and how students are academically successful in school. Lack of academic success and lack of enthusiasm are pervasive among African American male students attending urban public high schools (Fredericks et al., 2019). Equity for all students should be a core value in all school systems, but there are contributing perceived factors that are affecting academic achievement of African American males in education (Baranino, 2020, Greer & Kressler, (2022).

This phenomenon has been in education for decades, yet, it continues to widen through factors surrounding the gap. African American males should believe that regardless of their race, their schools will provide them with equitable resources, opportunity, and access that will assist with demonstrating their best academic achievement. Our African American male students in education should not have to worry if the color of their skin will impact their education (Gougis, 2020). All students should have the same opportunity to achieve high academic achievement. The lack of academic success among African American male high school students is contributing to a widening academic achievement gap (Greer & Kressler, (2022). The purpose of the proposed hermeneutic phenomenological study is to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of African American males, who attended urban high schools, concerning their academic achievement in North Carolina.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

Chapter two will identify research that delves into the contributing factors of African American male students' academic achievement in public schools. The theoretical framework of the chapter will offer an outline of the current text relating to this body of work. The Social Equity Theory (SET) will be covered in the first section. The theory will be the foundation of the research along with their relation to the central phenomena. Synthesizing of recent literature will be conducted in section two of this body of work. There are three main themes: (a) academic achievement gap, (b) the influence of race on African American male academic achievement, and (c) the role stakeholders play in African American male academic achievement. Each theme has corresponding sub themes that are contributing factors of African American male academic achievement. The first theme, academic achievement gap focuses on the origin of the academic achievement, and the impact of teacher expectations of students on the academic achievement gap. The second theme; the influence of race on African American male academic achievement explores (a) the historical perspective Black-White academic achievement gap and (b) the impact of the racial climate in education. The latter theme; the role stakeholder's play in African American male academic achievement discusses (a) the impact of faculty and staff, (b) the role of parents, guardians, and caregivers on African American male academic achievement, and (c) community support. Lastly, a gap in the literature will be identified, presenting a viable need for the current study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

As a qualitative study, the theoretical framework used in this research demonstrates the essential factors of the research process. The theory discussed in this chapter describes



specifically observable patterns related to African American male students in public education, as it relates to the social equity theory (SET). Propositions related to the theory is presented as well as the study's applicability to the study's problem.

### **Social Equity Theory**

The theoretical foundation of social equity is the idea that everyone should be treated equitably (Guy & McCandless, 2012). Regardless of ethnic origin, color, culture, religion, gender, or financial level, this equity must exist (Guy & McCandless, 2012; Johnson & Svara, 2011). However, in the United States, the distribution of fairness seems to ebb and flow, never completely flattening in a manner that is sustainable and long-lasting (Guy & McCandless, 2012; McKown, 2013). The government is viewed as the agent of change, bridging the gap between the haves and have-nots; however, this has yet to occur. Numerous minority groups continue to face an imbalance in compensation based on performance, often experiencing pain at being under-rewarded for exerting the same amount of work as their White colleagues (Johnson & Svara, 2011; McKown, 2013). Educational systems are not immune to social inequities. There is constant discussion regarding the need of recognizing and addressing individuals' unique needs to provide an educational experience that enables all students to succeed (McKown, 2013).

There is often misunderstanding when programs are focused at equality rather than equity. Equality entails delivering the same resources to everyone without regard for the individual's particular requirements. Equity guarantees that the appropriate quantity and type of resources are delivered, with an emphasis on individual need rather than on equal distribution. To level the playing field in public management, Frederickson (2005) developed the social equity hypothesis. Frederickson (2005) saw apparent accomplishment gaps across different ethnic groups and concluded that external stressors, such as social and economic factors, needed

to be addressed when dealing with public people. The question posed to everyone is what is required to ensure that delivered services are well-managed, efficient, and cost-effective for all parties involved (Frederickson, 2005). Equitable treatment might be provided to everyone, regardless of race, but not equal treatment. These concepts are currently implemented in a wide variety of contexts, not simply government and schools.

The concepts of social equity theory benefit education by understanding that all students should have equal opportunity regardless of their background or circumstances (Carpenter et al., 2006; Goss, 2017). The Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, which provides "equal protection of the laws" to "every person within its jurisdiction (U.S. Const. amend. XIV)," addressed these disparities. Adopting this amendment laid the groundwork for achieving group equality, also known as block equality (Bell, 1980). However, just because segregation was no longer permitted on a federal level did not imply it ceased to exist. Desegregation has made significant achievements over the last half-century, but there is still more work to be done before minorities achieve true equality with Whites.

By examining the contributing causes, social equity theory may be applied effectively in conjunction with research to alleviate the minority academic achievement gap. From a school perspective, social justice at work would place value on a children, parents, guardians, and caregivers. It would be ensuring that all children in the classroom had the resources necessary to succeed academically. For parents, guardians, and caregivers this entails determining their children's needs and then supporting them. A rising amount of research examines family life and finds that the strength of the parent-child connection is a consistent predictor of academic performance (Carpenter et al., 2006; Reeves & Howard, 2016). McKown (2013) research at Rush University Medical Center used social equity theory and its application to the academic

achievement gap for African American students to generate a set of hypothesized causal elements.

I used the SET four propositions to shape my study. The four propositions address the origins of racial/ethnic academic achievement gaps. The first proposition is that a direct influence supports achievement, but a signal influence tends to convey negative expectations for an individual's racial-ethnic group. McKown (2013) discovered that as stereotype group members perceive signals, academic performance starts to decline. The second proposition is that by the time a child is in their elementary years of schooling, they are better able to understand the stereotyped expectations and cues of that expectation (McKown, 2013). The third and fourth SET propositions are that there is a small range of developmentally variable environments that influence the academic achievement gap. Direct and signal influences in many developmental contexts have an impact on the achievement difference (McKown, 2013).

According to McKown (2013), the quality of instruction and the quality of student-teacher relationships can have a direct impact on racial-ethnic academic achievement gaps. Students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds tend to be affected by each of these school factors in the same way. In addition, high- quality instruction and rewarding student-teacher relationships are easier to come across for White students than for Black students (McKown, 2013). Reno et al. (2018) cited evidence that shows that students of color and boys are consistently overrepresented in detention, suspension, and expulsion. Although school-wide Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) systems have been shown to identify minority students who have disproportional access to supports, the research reveals that minority students are disproportionately referred to student support services (Reno, et al., 2018). In addition, Annamma, et al. (2014) also said that racial disproportionality occurs in the special

education, juvenile justice, and discipline systems. Categories that are far from proportional can represent the numerous types of direct influences in education, and their combined effect exacerbates the academic achievement gap. Signaling influences are social occurrences that, when observed by members of negatively stereotyped groups, send a message to them that they are worthless because of their group membership (McKown, 2013). Signal influences can be presented as is, be unclear, and have transactional value (McKown, 2013). Teacher perception includes implicit and explicit biases.

This knowledge influences student performance because teacher bias affects student achievement. Implicit biases and expectations were both seen to affect minority student academic achievement in the educational settings, as teachers conveyed their expectations while also subconsciously and actively affecting their students' outcomes. Stereotypes also function as an extra source of influence, with the additional effect of sending signals.

The use of direct and signal influences shaped the research questions used for this study. Participants' responses to the direct and signal influences of their surroundings on their academic performance will aid in the data processing and reporting of findings. More specifically my study will fill the gap in SET as it relates to the causes of the individual variability in achievement.

### **Related Literature**

African American male's history has been marked by adversity, a desire to become self-conscious men, and competition for recognition and independence among peers and in society. (Hinton & Cook 2021). The moment many of them open the doors of American schools, words such as "criminal," "aggressive," "anti-school," and "hardcore" hang over their heads (Ross & Stevenson, 2018). These negative stereotypes harm certain African American male students and prevent them from succeeding in the classroom. However, there are African American male

students who are able to persevere and have academic success. This section of related literature will share contributing factors that assist in high academic achievement for African American male students in public education.

### **Academic Achievement Gap**

Academic Achievement gap is a persistent, quantifiable disparity in academic performance as measured by test scores, grade- point averages, promotion and graduation rates, and other such factors between groups of students (Darby & Rury, 2018). While there are differing perspectives on the underlying reasons, which will be examined more in the literature study, there is a consistent downward trend toward the ineffectiveness of the No Child Left Behind Act (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002) and Every Student Succeeds Act (Every Student Succeeds [ESSA], 2015). NCLB (2002) established a set of standards that would apply to all public schools in the United States, as well as examinations to evaluate the standards' achievements. The outcomes of these evaluations determined the amount of federal funding that each school would be eligible to receive (Bifulco et al., 2009; Chakrabarti, 2012; NCLB, 2002). NCLB (2002) also mandated that schools should separate data, especially test results, by racial/ethnic group, handicap, and economic status in order to personalize the curriculum and close learning gaps (Hipp, 2018).

The data gathered painted a clear picture of the accomplishment difference; yet, rather than narrowing, the gap had risen in several school districts (Hipp, 2018). While academic difficulties may affect anybody, some ethnic groupings are more prone to them (Hammond, 2018)). The existence of these conflicts results in a systematic limitation of capacity that affects a large number of minority ethnic groups. Among such groups are African American males, who have traditionally faced discrimination in education (Zilanawala, et al., 2017).

### *The Origins of the Academic Achievement Gap*

The American public education system aims for all students to have the same access to a sound education. However, there are disparities in the education system that prevent all students from succeeding. One of the ongoing challenges of education in the United States is the racial differences between Black and White students' achievement (Bottiani et al., 2017). Racial differences is a problem that experts have been trying to fix for the past 50-60 years, starting with school integration (Bottiani et al., 2017). During integration, African Americans were believed to be inferior to Whites in cognitive ability, character, and conduct, though there was disagreement over whether nature or their unfortunate circumstances and culture were responsible (Darby & Rury, 2018).

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) maintains trends of all students' academic achievements. Over time NAEP indicates whether the academic achievement gap between Black students and White students is narrowing, widening, or remaining constant. In America the academic achievement between Black and White students has either widened or remained constant since 1970 (NAEP, 2021). Educators must understand there are systems that have been in place that are excluding students of color from achieving academic success. It is extremely difficult to influence or change long-standing beliefs, instead educators can influence people's behaviors and experiences (Hill, 2017).

The academic achievement gap is understood as the disparaging result of one group of students consistently outperforming another group, typically Black/Hispanic and White students (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2017). The concept of this gap was brought to light in 1966 when the infamous Coleman Report (Rivkin, 2017) was published. In this study, a sociologist John Coleman was asked by Congress to study equality of opportunity in schools

(Coleman & Marjoribanks, 1975). Coleman concluded that the effect of school resources on educational outcomes were modest, and that the student's family background was a stronger predictor of student academic achievement (Coleman & Marjoribanks, 1975). His study lends credibility to the argument against additional resources for schools serving poor and minority students (Darby & Rury, 2018). This uplifts another factor that influences the academic achievement gap other than race--household income.

The widening academic achievement gap has drawn the attention of policymakers and educators to strategies for assisting students from low-income households (Williams, et al., 2019). However, those policy makers have consistently failed. In reaction to poverty and unfairness in the educational system, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) into law (El Moussaoui, 2018). The ESEA did not expressly address the academic performance gap between Blacks and Whites, but it did create the Title 1 program to draw attention to the 35 concerns that faced impoverished Americans. Along with supporting districts in eliminating any traces of segregated schooling "root and branch," the initiative also aims to increase access to equitable educational opportunities (George & Darling-Hammond, 2019). The National Commission on Excellence in Education launched the standards movement in 1983 with the publication of *A Nation at Risk*. This study, which was both significant and controversial, showed that the United States was in danger as a result of its inadequate educational system. (Schultz-Jones et al., 2021).

George and Darling-Hammond (2019) asserted several presidential administrations have played a significant role in upholding Brown and encouraging educational diversity through the use of their bully pulpit and enforcement capabilities. NCLB was President George W. Bush's signature on the ESEA's renewal in 2002. NCLB was an effort to refocus attention on education

by imposing success requirements in public schools. One of its top aims was to use accountability, flexibility, and choice to decrease or even close the academic achievement gap (NCLB, 2002). NCLB's principal goal would be to equalize the academic playing field for African American kindergarten kids by fully financing Head Start and other early childhood education initiatives (Hammond, 2018).

With researchers doubting the ability of the NCLB to assist schools in closing the academic achievement gap, Acosta et al., (2020) noted that NCLB created a culture where the federal government monitored all students' academic achievement by establishing timetables for the implementation of NCLB mandates and schools' progress toward academic standards which increases pressure on schools. Hess & McShane (2018) believed there were positive attributes with NCLB, stating the use of the data infrastructure capable of collecting and managing the vast amounts of information required to pursue the new approaches to school accountability. Along with the NCLB- style accountability focused schools too intently all to engage with all students and create accountability for all involved (Hess & McShane, 2018). Although Green & McShane (2018) agreed with the conclusion. they took a more confrontational stance against schools, saying that the gap in academic performance between Black and White students is proof that the American public-school system is just one of many systems that is failing to meet the needs of all children.

As part of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which includes another renewal of the ESEA and a revision of the NCLB, then-President Barack H. Obama signed it into law in 2015. The ESSA is a significant divergence from the NCLB, most notably in that it returns decision-making authority to the states (El Moussaoui, 2018). The ESSA's declared goal is to



give all children a considerable chance to obtain a fair, equitable, and high-quality education, as well as to narrow educational performance disparities (ESSA, 2015).

### ***The Impact of Teacher Expectations***

Teachers are important inputs in the K-12 education production function who likely shape students' attitudes towards educational attainment (Redding, 2019). Despite the widespread belief that accomplishment is important, the consequences of the academic achievement gap can be felt as early as elementary school (Burson & Castelli, 2022). An increasing number of states are developing pre-kindergarten standardized assessments for school readiness. More than 70% of young children in the U.S. completed standardized tests in kindergarten at least once in the 2010-2011 academic year (Im, 2017). Teachers' expectations, or the views they hold about their students' academic ability, are a major modifiable contributor to students' academic achievement, and so it stands to reason that there would be a correlation between student academic achievement and teachers' expectations (Flanagan et al., 2020). Students' academic success is influenced by teachers' expectations; high expectations are linked to higher academic performance, whereas low expectations are linked to worse academic performance (Flanagan et al., 2020).

There are teachers who base their expectations for students' academic achievement on the students' ethnicity; students of color who engage with teachers who believe in their academic abilities gain the greatest benefit from having high academic expectations and achievement (Sebastian Cherng, 2017). Not only can expectations be shaped by ethnicity, but there is evidence that teacher expectations change based on a student's socioeconomic status (Johnston, et al., 2019). This deficit viewpoint can lead to low expectations and in turn can impact the quality and effectiveness of the teacher (Kennedy & Soutullo, 2017).

There is evidence that White children with comparable academic accomplishments gain more from better teachers, more challenging curriculum, and greater connections with their teachers than their African American counterparts do (McKown,2013). According to Andrew & Gutwein (2017), academic achievement of students is affected by both student behavior and academic performance, and teachers may even create a more positive socioemotional environment for students with whom they have high expectations. Teachers' attitudes toward their students have been associated to differential teacher expectations, which could lead to complacency, acceptance of failure, and low expectations for African Americans and other marginalized student groups (Pit-ten Cate & Glock, 2019).Tinto (2017) asserted, educators must be aware of how their attitudes and actions may influence student views of education, and educators must understand how students perceive their educational experiences in order to address their issues.

When it comes to students, teachers' expectations have the potential to become their own self-fulfilling prophecy (Wong & Wong, 2018). When teachers establish expectations, even if they are erroneous, they will begin to behave as if their ideas are true (Evan, 2020). When teachers have low expectations for a group of students, they begin to act on those low expectations by giving students less time to respond to questions, less eye contact, and significantly fewer interactions with students (Pit-ten Cate & Glock, 2019). These actions influence the student and their ability to achieve academically.

Teachers recognize that there are numerous aspects that influence their students' academic achievement; yet, the level of the teacher's expectation role in a student's academic achievement remains controversial (Szumski & Karwowski, 2019).

Lowered expectations and biases have an adverse impact on students' academic achievement. As students continue to matriculate through school, the academic achievement gap continues to grow (Paschall et al., 2017). Reduced rigor in the classroom is one inclination that, although well-intentioned in terms of allowing students to feel accomplished, may enhance stereotype danger. Tinto (2017) asserted Teachers sometimes feel that lowering the academic difficulty for kids in the classroom and making the work simpler for the students will boost the students' self-efficacy. Using the following principles, Sebastian (2017) contends that the opposite is true. (a) High expectations for all students, not just one particular group of students, encourage learning, and (b) students learn best when teachers, staff, and the community all have clear and consistent expectations for what students should know and believe the student can accomplish the task. (c) An emphasis on outcomes for all students promotes student academic achievement.

Teachers who work in public schools where there is a sizable disparity in academic achievement or where there is a significant African American population feel underprepared because they are not receiving adequate support or effective professional development to deal with the complex and multifaceted problems that frequently cause the achievement gap. (Gentrup, 2020). Darling- Hammond et al., (2017) asserted the following features of effective professional development should be implemented to assist teachers (a) Content focused. (b) Incorporates active learning. (c) Supports collaboration. (d) Uses models of effective practice. (e) provides additional coaching and support. (f) offers feedback and reflection.

Once teachers understand their expectations impact student academic achievement, particularly between White teachers and African American student they will be able to achieve comparable academic and social development to their classmates (Gershenson et al., 2018).

Unconscious biases are a nontrivial problem in education; teachers, school administrators, and fellow students may all contribute significantly to the persistence of the academic achievement gap by making unconsciously biased judgments about students (Dee & Gerhenson, 2017). Despite the fact that all groups of students have equivalent academic abilities, there are teachers who treat African American students differently than White students due to this bias (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). Additionally, biases might manifest as having lower expectations for African American students' performance, which is related to African American students' preconceived conceptions of having a lower cognitive capacity (Gorski, 2019). Even though our students are resilient, the opportunities and possibilities that our teachers provide to the students have a direct impact on the academic achievement of our students (Agasisti et al., 2018). This is because our teachers have a direct impact on the academic achievement of our students. Negative opinions about a student's ability or willingness to do assigned work may strain the teacher-student relationship, which is sometimes difficult to repair and impacts the whole school experience (Redding, 2019). When a teacher's perceptions and expectations of a student come to life, it may be the difference between success and failure for minority students who may already be at a disadvantage in terms of educational assistance (Redding, 2019).

Teachers who have been successful in closing their school's academic achievement gap have noted that they not only had to learn how to be more culturally sensitive and relevant, but they also had to guarantee that all students were held to the same level of learning (Bottiani et al., 2017, Datnow et al., 2018). By using inclusive and creative educational strategies, teachers may

stimulate students' attention and foster deeper participation. While they needed to be attentive to the requirements of a varied student population, they also needed to ensure equity and assist students in achieving their personal best in their studies (Redding, 2019; Zhang et al., 2018). Providing space for the merger of creativity, originality, and intellect by allowing students to apply their own experiences into assignments, for instance, through the usage of student voice being amplified in the classroom (Zhang et al., 2018). With ongoing reinforcement of their abilities, African American students are able to achieve at or near the same academic achievement level as their peers, which leads to the expected increases in test scores and grades (Datnow et al., 2018).

### **The Influence of Race on African American Male Academic Achievement**

African Americans in the United States have experienced a lengthy history of uneven treatment under the law. Since colonial times, and maybe even to the present day, there has been a difference in equitable access to education between Whites and African Americans. In the past, education was generally reserved for Whites of more means or for Whites who need instruction in how to read and understand the Christian Bible (Gougis, 2020). More than 50 years after *Brown v. Education Board of Topeka Kansas* in 1954, African American students continue to trail their White peers on a variety of important educational indicators (Goldhaber and Ozek, 2019). For minorities, education can be an opportunity to overcome historical oppression that has plagued many people of color from achieving social mobility (Bowman, et al., 2018).

### ***The Historical Perspective of Black-White Academic Achievement Gap***

Schools are challenged by the intricacies associated with where African American males come from and their experiences; yet, they are expected to ensure they are still successful in school. Between 2015- 2017, White students scored on average 27 points higher than Black

students on standardized tests (U.S Department of Education, 2019). The Black-White academic achievement gap was wider in 2015 (30 points) than in 1992 (24 points) (U.S Department of Education, 2019). The data shows that the academic achievement gap is not closing; however, it continues to widen. There are people who teach students and feel as though they do not see color--they see the students as individuals, and they are colorblind. However, color blindness functions as a silencing mechanism, which mutes racialized experiences because there is no space for those types of lived experiences (Vue, et., 2017).

Closing the academic achievement gap became a priority of the federal education reform with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, whose purpose was to close the academic achievement gap and ensure that all students no matter their demographic, would experience success (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). This also caused schools and districts to disaggregate student test scores and other success data by student attributes to make clearer comparisons between groups (Goldhaber and Ozek , 2019). This created greater racial inequalities and growing anxiety over other forms of differences in achievement.

The debate over NCLB continues to rage in educational, governmental, and public forums across the United States. The focus of NCLB led to further focused programs for diverse classes of students, but most of the gaps in academic achievement were not narrowed (Barnum, 2017). Instead of seizing the opportunity to create their own school improvement strategies, the state generated plans that are mainly ambiguous and non-specific in terms of how they will assist low-performing schools (Barnum, 2017). Despite extensive research, the understanding of why the academic achievement gap exists is still limited (Paschall, et al., 2017). There has been minimal progress over time towards educational equity and the growing disparities (Paschall, et al., 2017).

According to a 2022 report on the condition of education 2022 by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), there are persistent discrepancies between White and African American male academic achievement. There was also more data to support the idea of a widening gender disparity. Congress directed the US Department of Education to prepare a report detailing the discrepancies in minority boys' access to and completion of higher education, as well as specific strategies to assist close the gaps (Higher Education Opportunity Act, H.R. 4137, 110th Cong. Section 1109, 2008). In 2020 the Higher Education Opportunity Act was reauthorized within the reauthorization the act made a conscience effort to promote opportunity and innovation in education for all students (Fountain, 2021). As the racial academic achievement gap continues to grow the trajectories of students are being impacted and their opportunities for success are being limited (Vue, et al., 2017)

### ***The Impact of the Racial Climate in Education***

Wynes (1968) asserted that the superior White race had a responsibility to impart to the inferior African Americans their history of four thousand years of barbarism, the rich wisdom of citizenship. However, those of African descent had comparable obligations: implicit compliance, reverence, loyalty, and work (Wynes, 1968). By purpose, freed African Americans were persuaded to feel that segregation protected them, that segregation was in their best interests, and that compliance with the laws was a contractual responsibility. African Americans were socialized to think that government was for the intellectual, educated, and the rich, and that the ignorant, working class excelled at menial duties and should be barred from political involvement and decisions affecting their own welfare (Greenberg, 1959; Wynes, 1968). As a result, various laws were enacted to keep the freed man as close to slavery-like circumstances as possible, out of fear of an uprising (Dabbs, 1973).

In 1954 Judge Robert Carter who presented part of the oral argument in the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* asserting that the policy and practice that emerged from *Brown* and other civil rights legislation addressed superficial symptoms, leaving the disease of White supremacy/racism embedded in U.S. institutions (Kohli, et al., 2017). After the election of the first African American President Barack Obama, many thought that America had entered a post-racial era (Vue, et al., 2017). However, public education tends to continue to struggle to deal significantly with the creation and consequences of racial dominance through its science, policy and practices, despite systemic manifestations of prejudice on a global scale (Brooms, 2019). Racism issues remain silent or rather, are erased, often in lieu of color-blind and technocratic approaches to creation within teaching (Vue, et al., 2017). This not only ignores the sector's historical links to systems of racial domination, but also the current ways in which the field is implicated in producing unequal outcomes along racial lines (Sriparakash et al., 2019).

Racial and economic segregation in schools still exists and is relatively high, with the majority of students of color attending poorer, more segregated, and lower performing schools (Grace & Nelson, 2018). While desegregation was crucial for the social atmosphere in the United States, the event altered the narrative surrounding academic achievement. Academic achievement became inextricably linked to White identity thanks to Black students' integration into all-White schools, where they were unwelcome. (Eguia, 2017). This perception is still prevalent in today's society, and Black males who display intellectual ability may face charges from others in their society that they are "acting White." (Tyson et al., 2017). Though some African American males have a good academic identity, the relationship between performing well in school and "acting White" may widen the gap by supporting the myth that African American men are incapable of intellectual achievement (Tyson et al., 2017). The climate is a



leverage point for educational achievement to be nurtured. For African American males, a supportive climate encourages positive improvements in trust, improved engagement, and stronger intellectual identification (Brooms, 2019).

African American males live in society and school with targets on their backs, while being killed by police and suspended from school at a disproportionate rate (Coles & Powell, 2020; Bell, 2020). School-based challenges often work in concert, rather than in isolation, to impede efforts toward educational equity and success for African American males (Griffin & Nelson, 2018; Martin & Beese, 2017); Yang et al., 2018) . For example, African American students are more likely to be referred to special education programs for behavioral problems than for academic concerns; African American students are overrepresented in subjectively diagnosed and stigmatized disability categories and underrepresented in objectively diagnosed and stigmatized disability categories (Grace & Nelson, 2018).

In general, African American students are more than three times as likely as White students to be subjected to some form of exclusionary punishment (Griffin & Nelson, 2018; Martin & Beese, 2017). Compared to their White peers, African American students are four times more likely to receive a school suspension and two and a half times more likely to be expelled. (Griffin & Nelson, 2018; Martin & Beese,2017) Although only about 5% of students are suspended during any given school year, longitudinal research has found that between one third and half of students are suspended at least once between kindergarten and twelfth grade (Griffin & Nelson, 2018). African American males are disproportionately vulnerable, with over 70% getting at least one suspension or expulsion throughout their K-12 years (Yang et., 2018). While out-of-school suspensions and other types of exclusionary punishment have been demonstrated to be unsuccessful in preventing poor student behaviors, suspension and expulsion

referrals for African American male students have grown, while referrals for White students have remained constant. The backgrounds of African American males, namely hardship, deprivation, and lack of family structure, hinder their emotional development; contribute to feelings of sadness, frustration, and depression; and trigger them to be hypersensitive in social contexts to insults and irritability, all of which have some impact on their self-confidence and academic achievement (Akbari & Sahibzada, 2020).

The aforementioned factors cause an entire demographic to be inadequately educated creating a larger academic achievement gap. McKown (2013) asserted when a large segment of the population is inadequately educated, democracy's health is at risk. McKown (2013) found a link between academic achievement and ultimate employment and wage levels. McGee (2021) asserted that the academic success of African American students is extremely important because the United States of America will be unable to effectively compete in a global market if a sizeable portion of its student population is not well educated. According to Howard (2020), one of the most significant problems confronting the United States is the widespread misconception that eradicating the academic achievement gap will signify that the country's struggles with civil rights issues are drawing to a close and will bring about educational equality between African Americans and their White classmates. Currently, the academic achievement gap acts as a warning indication of continuing inequity in society and education.

A person's perceptions of the necessity for a deliberate effort to close the academic achievement gap will alter only if they feel it is necessary (Hanushek et al., 2019). However, African Americans are at a political disadvantage in this situation. Hartney and Flavin (2017) discovered that White support for education reforms, as well as subsequent teacher quality reform policymaking, are significantly associated with the performance of White students, but

not with the performance of African American students, according to their research. Hartney and Flavin (2017) also found that White people are less likely than African Americans to believe that the government has a duty to bridge the gap and that it is a lesser priority in terms of policy considerations than African Americans. Because White Americans constitute the majority of voters in most parts of the country, their views on education reform can have a significant impact on the political importance and educational concerns. In most parts of the country, White Americans constitute the voting majority, so their views on education reform can have a significant impact on the political importance on African American educational concerns. Understanding that the academic achievement gap is ethically wrong and detrimental to some (but not others) is the first step toward ethical responsibility" (Greer, W., & Kressler, B (2022).

### **The Role Stakeholders Play in African American Male Academic Achievement**

Stakeholders such as school staff, parents, guardians, caregivers, and community play a vital role in the academic achievement of African American males. African American males' experiences with the stakeholders is essential to their success in school There are times when the only time African American males feel as though they are safe is at school.

#### ***The Impact of Faculty and Staff***

According to the United States Department of Education (2019), the proportion of overall students in the United States has decreased from 15% to 14%. African American faculty members are underrepresented in public education, accounting for just 7% of instructors in the United States (U. S. Department of Education 2019). The representation of African American faculty is of importance because interaction with staff members who are of the same race as the students of color has been shown to increase academic achievement (Neville & Parker, 2017). As a result, it is critical for public education to boost the number of African American teachers.

Students' educational experiences and academic achievement can be increased when administrators, staff, and teachers at their schools work together to assist the student. A research study conducted by Banks and Dohy (2019) students of color do not always connect with counselors and teachers, they also felt that some student felt as though that some professors do not care about the success of their students. In other words, student-teacher relationships are just as critical as academic achievement.

Given the underrepresentation of African American teachers in education, cultural competency is a vital ability for teachers who work with African American children. Teachers, according to Civitillo et al., (2019), prefer to emphasize cultural commonalities and minority groups' assimilation into mainstream culture, such strategies for addressing cultural diversity in the classroom fall short of fostering equity and preserving cultural difference. To be clear, this does not imply that the teacher should attempt to be colorblind. Aragón et al., (2017) suggested that, one ideology, colorblindness, proposes that differences between groups of people should not matter, and that we all should be equal in regard to treatment, opportunity, and outcomes, although a "colorblind" approach to teaching has admirable intentions, accumulating evidence suggests that those educators who are leading the charge on racial problems in education may be misusing their position. Hazelbaker and Mistry (2021) affirm that the adoption of a colorblind ideology, set of viewpoints, and set of behaviors makes it difficult, if not impossible, to detect deeper and more systematic inequities in educational policies and practices. In an effort to be "colorblind," one runs the risk of overlooking the real difficulties that African American children encounter, problems that White children do not. As a result, despite the fact that they exist in two quite distinct worlds, an egalitarian educator could try to educate two children who are fairly similar in many aspects in the same manner. This is not to suggest that students should be treated

any differently than the rest of the population. According to Edwards (2017), the danger of stereotypes is likely to be increased by greater treatment provided to members of a stereotyped group that is not motivated by a conscious effort to reduce inequities but rather by the teacher's spontaneous desire.

Fenzel and Richardson (2019) emphasized the relevance of African American men with role models and mentors in promoting positive academic achievement and results. The presence of role models in school who may help underline the value of education can serve as a motivator for African American males to succeed academically (Fenzel & Richardson, 2019). Sanchez et al., (2017) conducted research that underlined the value of a mentor for African American male students in school, regardless of the mentor's race. However, students claimed that it was advantageous to have a mentor with a similar racial background (Sanchez et al., 2017). Any faculty member with whom the student has a relationship within the building qualifies as a mentor (Johnson et al., 2019). African American males benefit from having quality teachers as well (Redding, 2019). A study conducted by Brooms (2019) concluded that Black students valued having access to highly-skilled teachers who pushed them academically and provided them with the tools they needed to succeed in higher education. Gaining a greater awareness of the value of social ties in the classroom can assist in the development of positive interactions, which can lead to increased academic achievement (Brooms, 2019).

It is very important for African American male students to have mentors, teachers, and school administrators who help them increase academic achievement. School counselors are also important contributors to the academic success of students in their classes (Lewis et al., 2020). The duties of a school counselor extend beyond academic scheduling and ensuring that all students have access to courses that will be beneficial to them in the future (Hines et al., 2017).

School counselors have the capacity to develop meaningful relationships with students to the point where students are willing to relate the difficulties they are experiencing and how school officials may assist them in achieving academic achievement (Dameron et al., 2019). As previously said, the social aspects of education are just as vital as the academic aspects of education. The culture is what influences the environment and dictates how people feel when they come into a building or a classroom for the first time (Billy, 2018). Schools that cultivate a climate of optimism, build strong relationships with parents, guardians, and caregivers engage in meaningful parent-school partnerships will have a favorable influence on students' academic achievement (Williams et al., 2019). School counselors are playing an important part in establishing a positive atmosphere and culture in their respective schools (Dameron et al., 2019).

### ***The Role of Family***

Depending on the state you reside in, the school leaving age also known in North America as status dropout age or minimum dropout age is between 16-18 years old has declined over the last 40 years, falling from 14.1 percent in 1976 to 6.1 percent in 2016 (McFarland et al., 2018). Therefore, attending school is not a choice for students until they reach that age. It is the responsibility of the parents, guardian, caregivers, family, and community to support and engage students to remain in school and ensure their student is attending school (Garcia- Carrion et al., 2018). Those positive engagements support and transforms the educational and social prospects of vulnerable African American males on the verge of failure who now wish to continue their education (Garcia- Carrion et al., 2018). Henry et al., (2020) asserted that though cognitive abilities and intellectual capacity do have significant heritable components, a detailed review of the evidence indicates that genetic differences cannot account for the majority of the variances in these characteristics because they become apparent after birth. Along with that Henry et al.,

(2018) noted race and socioeconomic status interact dynamically to shape children's developmental contexts and academic achievement. In the United States, the family and its makeup have a significant impact on the ongoing achievement disparity.

Single parent, guardian, and caregiver homes, poverty, discrimination, resentment, stability, and community characteristics are some variables that may have a detrimental influence on the family unit and have a direct impact on a child's academic achievement (Kam et al., 2018). Approximately 19.5 percent of African Americans live below the federally defined poverty line in (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020). This is more than twice the ratio of their White counterparts and two percent higher than Hispanics, according to the Census Bureau's report on income and poverty in the United States 2022 (U.S Census Bureau, 2022). Massey (2020) asserted the structural cornerstone of contemporary racial relations is the spatial segregation of African Americans from Whites, which is the primary social mechanism by which racial stratification was established and has been sustained in the United States. According to Reardon et al. (2018), this has led to a rise in class segregation in the United States and increasing spatial isolation for both the poor and the wealthy (Massey and Rugh, 2020). Thus, segregation continues to be a key socioeconomic connection in America and has an impact on public education. According to Massey (2021), Black children attend schools that are 67 percent Black or Hispanic, where 63 percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, while White children attend schools that are 74% White or Asian and just a third of the students qualify. Because of the strong correlation Massey and Rugh (2020) argued it is, vital to identify characteristics that enhance African American students' academic achievement in order to close the achievement gap.

Everyone agrees that parents, guardians, and caregivers are crucial partners in their children's education, but because of their current financial situation, many families, especially those living in poverty and working-class families living in inner cities and rural areas, find it difficult to give their children access to adequate educational opportunities (Myende & Nhlumayo, 2020). According to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, states are required to monitor whether low-income students have equitable access to effective teachers and to create plans to make sure that low-income and minority children enrolled in Title I schools aren't given disproportionately poor or unqualified instruction. Isenber et al. (2021) note that cultural differences between teachers and lower-income families also play a part in this struggle, which is why poor African American children continue to struggle in the classroom due to lower expectations, a failure to effectively communicate expectations, and a lack of effective instruction and assessments.

Land et al. (2014) investigated six successful African American male high school students and found that, despite their achievement, many of them were unhappy with their home lives due to the economic and social pressures imposed on their parents, guardians, and caregivers. There was insufficient financial assistance and parental participation for these students. It was not possible for them to have a parent, guardian, or caregiver at home when they returned from school to assist them with schoolwork (Land et al., 2014). The researchers also discovered that a family structure that does not include a father has a substantial influence on children's development. Due to the absence of a father figure at home, they were obliged to "grow up" and care for themselves and sometimes family members, whereas students with father figures were able to delegate such obligations (Land et al., 2014).



In the United States, the number of African Americans living in families headed by a single mother is rising at the same time that the number of children being raised without a father is rising (Elliott et al., 2017). To that point, a research study conducted by Barger et al., (2019) found that fathers may have a significant impact on whether or not children learn in the school, depending on their actions. According to Barger et al. (2019), fathers' expectations and own educational achievements can serve as a motivational element for African American males to reach high academic standards.

With the escalation of fatherless homes, the academic achievement gap is widening. The living situation of the student is beyond their control; however, it does impact their academic achievement (Cooper et al., 2020). Along with the escalating fatherless homes, 51 percent of public-school students in the United States between the age of five and 17 live in homes that are below the federal poverty level (Williams et al., 2019). As previously highlighted, students from low- income homes do not achieve academically as well as their peers from higher-income levels. Parent, guardian, and caregivers' attitudes and high educational expectations can change the trajectory of a student academically (Badger et al., 2019). With these expectations, parents, guardians, and caregivers need to make sure they have a healthy relationship, expose their children to a variety of activities and programs, and, in homes with only one parent, guardian, or caregiver seek out mentors or models for their children to look up to. (Badger et al., 2019). Some parents, guardian, and caregivers work longer hours or relocate to locations with greater educational resources in order to make sacrifices and give up their own career goals in order to ensure their children have positive educational exposure and experiences (Cooper, 2020).

Having a father with low educational achievement and high academic expectations could be stressful for a child, given the importance of fathers' engagement in their children's lives

(Barger et al., 2019). Lack of a role model who may serve as a resource and increased family pressure to perform well in school can result in decreased academic achievement and educational aspirations (Cano, 2020). Additionally, the self-perception and attitude of African American boys may be detrimental to their chances of succeeding in school (Elliott et al., 2017). African American boys are disproportionately influenced by negative preconceptions, according to Xu et al. (2020), who also note that children benefit greatly from having the support of the entire family in overcoming these stereotypes and increasing academic achievement.

According to Hornsby and Blackwell (2018), some parents, guardians, and caregivers are unwilling to get involved and provide assistance with school after their child reaches a particular age due to their own low literacy levels, which is detrimental to the academic success of the child. Hornsby and Blackwell (2018) also found that as children's expectations for greater independence grow and school contact diminishes, parents, guardians, and caregivers may withdraw and let their children to navigate without as much assistance. Another significant problem that has to be addressed is the common misperception that parents are responsible for the upbringing of their children at home and then send them to schools to learn, where they are subject to the supervision and authority of teachers and school administrators. (Duman et al., 2018).

As a result, parents, guardians, and caretakers avoid from getting too engaged beyond the elementary years for fear of interfering with the teachers' responsibilities during the school day. (Duman et al., 2018). This is not to say they are unconcerned with their children's education; rather, it reflects the power division inherent in African American society. According to studies, many parents, guardians, and caregivers are conscious of their role as co-educators and share equal responsibility for their children's future success (Matteucci & Helker, 2018). However,

when questioned by Matteucci and Helker (2018), a sizable proportion of believed that the major responsibility of teaching their children rested with the school and instructors. They thought that since their kid spent so much time at school, it was incumbent for the school to create the tone for success that would benefit their children (Williams et al., 2017). This involves creating a safe and conducive learning environment for all children, ensuring that they have an equal chance to achieve (Williams et al., 2017).

Families have a variety of reasons for being or not being engaged in their children's education. Some are unable to participate due to job responsibilities, while others are unsure how to assist (Park et al., 2017). Some parents, guardians, and caregivers believe that a hands-off attitude is ideal and that they will be alerted if their kid or teacher needs assistance (Park et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2017). Still, some parents, guardians, and caregivers think they are ignored and looked down upon by schools, resulting in a feeling of unwelcome and unwanted involvement in their child's school or educational process (Park et al., 2017; Barger et al., 2019). This feeling is reduced when there is more communication between with school staff, which also acts as a source of empowerment for parents, guardians, and caregivers, especially those who have students who present difficulties (Vinopal, 2017). When parents, guardians, and caregivers feel embraced and invited by the school or teacher, they are more likely to speak openly about how the school can help them and, as a result, their children (Park et al; Williams et al., 2017).

### ***The Role of the Community***

Another aspect that influences academic achievement is the amount of community support provided to the student. Wei et al., (2018) asserted the importance of education in fostering economic growth, fairness, and social justice, as well as community engagement, public health, and urban safety, cannot be overstated. Communities that encourage togetherness,

involvement, and engagement have been shown to have a positive impact on the academic achievement of the students that reside (Epstein, 2018). The support of the community can assist students in gaining access to additional resources and in creating a more secure environment, both of which can help to lessen the risks associated with poor academic performance (Epstein, 2018). Effective communities provide students with encouragement, support, and wisdom at crucial times in their lives when they may not necessarily receive these things from their homes (Driskell, 2017). Therefore, it is acceptable to arrive at the conclusion that locations which lack these essential community links can have a negative effect on the academic achievement of students in such locations.

When students reside in neighborhoods where they more likely exposed to violence and the perception of the neighborhood is considered unsafe those students more likely not to succeed academically in school (Sykes et al., 2017). According to Fitzgerald et al. (2019), the effect of single-parent, guardian, and caretaker families has a direct association with the increased risk of being exposed to violence in the community. Furthermore, Elliott & Reid (2019) emphasized that single African American mothers with low social economic status calibrate their parenting strategies not only to fears that their children will be criminalized by mainstream institutions and the police, but also to concerns that they themselves will be criminalized as bad mothers who could lose their parenting rights. Cabrera et al. (2018) make a persuasive argument that fathers matter and have an impact on children both directly and indirectly, but their lack of representation in society deprives young males of positive role models for the community. The development of schools in an area where unemployment, safety issues, and single parent, guardian, and caregiver home problems are prevalent may be seen as a sign of hope, but it is not the solution, and academic disparities continue (Daniel et al., 2020).

African American communities are understandably frustrated by public schools' failure to provide an adequate education for young African American males, and this frustration has manifested itself into a power struggle with public schools and politicians (Manzer, 2018). Public schools are not simply objects of dominance and products of compromise; they also have the potential to be instruments of political consensus-building (Manzer, 2018). The discussion among school and political leaders over how to deal with their young people's education has at times become a source of conflict, preventing any progress toward strengthening the educational system (Archer, 2018). Mondisa and McComb (2018) recommend that leaders in disadvantaged neighborhoods develop community mentoring and tutoring projects in partnership with local schools and churches. Community access to learning centers and other educational opportunities may be helpful. Despite the fact that low-income neighborhoods often have less community resources available, the existence of such possibilities is evidence that the community is making an investment in the children's future by giving greater options for education (Grant & Ray, 2018).

In addition to factors relating to the surrounding environment, peer support and students forming a community within their surroundings both fall under the umbrella term community support. Previous study has shown the effect of peer support on academic attainment. (Grant & Ray, 2018). While a supportive community with resources and a safe environment is essential, encouraging individuals in such locations may also have an influence on students' academic achievement (Barlett & Freeze, 2018). Similarly, violence may have the same effect on student academic progress. While violence is a risk factor for low academic achievement, the environment may also have an impact on African American boys' self-esteem (Grace & Nelson, 2019). According to Watts & Abdul-Adil (2018), African American culture has an impact on the

success of African American males. They discovered that academic expectations are linked to oppositional identities and cultural distrust, and that when cultural prejudices about education are allowed to impact academic self-concept, African American males have lower academic self-confidence because they believe they are incapable of achieving well (Watts & Abdul-Adil, 2018)

### **Summary**

African American male students face a variety of obstacles that prohibit them from being successful in society; these obstacles are also present in the American educational system, as evidenced by the fact that they do not succeed at the same level as their classmates. (Hawkins-Jones, & Reeves, 2020). In all educational systems, the principle of equity for all children should be a key goal, however there are a variety of contributing circumstances that might affect the academic progress of African American male students. Little is known about a combination of factors that contribute to high academic achievement among African American male students (Liou & Rotheram-Fuller, 2019). However, prior research has only looked at one or two paths in terms of African American male academic achievement; as a result, older research has failed to notice how direct and signal influences affect the academic achievement of African American males (McKown, 2013).

The use of McKown's social equity theory to understand the factors that contribute to the academic success gap is beneficial, even though there has been much research on the issue of academic achievement (McKown, 2013). African American male students are affected by a range of circumstances in a variety of ways, and some of these affects will have an impact on their academic abilities as well as their everyday life (Bowman et al., 2018). This study will

explore the perceptions and lived experiences of African American males, who attended urban high schools, concerning their academic achievement in North Carolina.

This research will seek understand the perceptions and lived experiences of African American males concerning their academic achievement in North Carolina. The academic achievement gap between African American and White students will be investigated first. However, if one recognizes the disparities, one may acknowledge the truth that there are African American male students who thrive academically despite the challenges they confront in their life (Rogers et al., 2018). Second, understand the impact of race on the academic performance of African American male students. Finally, we will look at the role and effect stakeholders have on African American male students' academic achievement. It takes a village to help students succeed; we cannot rely solely on schools to ensure the academic success of African American males; the support of a student's parents, guardians, caregivers, and community is equally crucial (Brown et al., 2019).

The academic achievement gap between African American and White students in the United States jeopardizes the future well-being of Black children in the country (Parnes et al., 2020). According to the findings of research, poor academic achievement among African American students adds to a persistent pattern of African American and White inequity that has an impact on adult success in U.S. society, including educational attainment and salaries (Henry, et al., 2020). The effect of these influences has the potential to assist all African American male students achieve academic success.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of the proposed hermeneutic phenomenological study is to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of African American males, who attended urban high schools, concerning their academic achievement in North Carolina. This chapter describes the procedures, research design, and analysis of this phenomenological study. The chapter consists of the following sections: Design, Research Questions, Setting, Participants, Procedures, The Researcher's Role, Data Collection, Data Analysis, Trustworthiness, Ethical Considerations and Summary.

### **Research Design**

Qualitative research was the planned research design for this study. The study was qualitative due to qualitative research being an inquiry process of understanding of social or human problems (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The process of understanding social or human problems allows for some phenomena to be observed. Qualitative research entails a variety of practices that reduce the world to a series of representations such as field notes, interviews, conversations, recordings, and self-reflections. (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The desire to understand a human problem is why qualitative research was selected as the method approach for this study.

There are five major approaches to research that fall under qualitative research: Narrative, Phenomenology, Grounded Theory, Ethnography, and Case study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). There are two approaches to phenomenological research, transcendental phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology. Transcendental phenomenology focuses on the descriptions of research participants' experiences with a particular phenomenon of study (Creswell & Poth,



2018). Although Heidegger views hermeneutics to be the business of interpretation, van Manen goes farther by claiming that hermeneutic phenomenology is a human science concerned with the human world in all its many dimensions (Nigar, 2019). Both techniques rely on the study participants' real voices as experts on their lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Unlike the transcendental technique, which provides descriptive analysis, the hermeneutic phenomenological approach analyzes participant data (Santiago et al., 2020). According to Dangal and Joshi (2020), hermeneutic phenomenology is ideally suited to give descriptive elucidation in connection to a phenomena in relation to time, location, and context. This study is hermeneutic in nature since it seeks to analyze the lived academic experiences of African Americans who formally attended urban public high schools in North Carolina.

### **Research Questions**

The researcher strives to find answers to the central research question for an exploration of the central phenomenon. Followed by subsequent research questions that are more specific to the phenomenon that is being studied.

#### **Central Research Question**

What are the perceptions and lived academic experiences of African American males, who attended urban high schools, concerning their academic achievement in North Carolina?

#### **Sub-Question One**

What are the participants' perceptions of the factors that contributed to their academic achievement?

#### **Sub-Question Two**

How do participants feel their race influenced their academic achievement?

#### **Sub-Question Three**

How did a parent, guardian, or caregiver influence the participants' academic performance?

### **Setting and Participants**

The setting and participants are two critical components of this research study. This section describes the location of the research study. Additionally, it will describe the type of participants based on the shared characteristics of race, age, and prior enrollment in an urban school district.

#### **Setting**

The urban school district selected for this study was Durham Public Schools (DPS) in Durham, North Carolina. This county, is the 6<sup>th</sup> most populous county of 100 counties in the state with 320,146 residents, which meets Welsh & Swain (2020) criteria of an urban community. The study's district has a population of 52,000 students of that number 47% of the students are African American (N.C. Department of Instruction, 2019). DPS has the largest percentage of African American students in one school district in the state of North Carolina (N.C. Department of Instruction, 2019). The school district also has disproportionalities between their African American and White students in suspensions, academics and graduation rates. African American students are six times more likely to be suspended than their White peers (N.C. Department of Instruction, 2019). There is a 45% gap in end of grade testing between African American and White students (N.C. Department of Instruction, 2019).

There is also a 20% gap in the graduation rate between Black and White students (N.C. Department of Instruction, 2019). The large population of Black students and the disproportionality in the district provides the greatest opportunity to select qualified participants for the study. The school district has a strategic plan, in the plan the district has goals geared

specifically to decrease the disparities in academics, graduation rates, and discipline among Black students and their peers. The school district is governed by the school board of education. The school district is led by the superintendent and cabinet members. The superintendent's cabinet members lead different departments in the district such as Human Resources, Academic Services, Operational Services, Public Affairs, and Research and Accountability.

### **Participants**

The selected sample of participants were drawn from those who self-identify as African Americans males, formerly enrolled in a DPS for at least two academic years prior to leaving or graduating school, and not have been out of school more than ten years and maintained minimum unweighted grade point average of 3.5 meet the criteria for participation in the study. Any former DPS students who met these qualifications are eligible potential participants (Patton, 2015). All participants where be able to share their perceptions and lived experiences with regards to the central research question and subsequent research questions in the study.

Phenomenological studies recommend between five and 25 individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Liberty University requires a minimum of 10 participants. As 10 people are said to be adequate by Gill (2020), I choose 10 participants for the research. If I had not achieved saturation with the 10 participants, I would have raised the number of participants until no new information was acquired (Gill, 2020). Purposive sampling was used to choose participants for my research study. Purposive sampling, according to Andrade (2020), is the purposeful selection of a participant based on the attributes the individual has.

### **Researcher Positionality**

This research is meaningful to me for many reasons. Being an African American male in society has its challenges. As an African-American male, I continue to live the experiences that have haunted me since adolescence. Growing up, I was fortunate to have both parents in the home who stressed the importance of education and how I needed to do well in school. However, looking back on my experience growing up, I did not realize that there were factors outside of the home that contributed to my brother's and my success in school. My physiological needs were met however, I struggled to do well in school. I had classmates who looked like me and did not have all of their physiological needs met; however, they were successful in school. I was able to graduate from high school and go to college at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, a historically Black university. Additionally, I had the opportunity to be Senior Class President while in college.

After college graduation, I decided to become an educator. It was my aspiration to help make a difference in the lives of students. Throughout my educational journey, I have served as a teacher, basketball coach, career development coordinator, special populations coordinator, a school administrator, and now a central services administrator. During my time as an educator, I worked in schools that were classified as Title 1 schools where students come from low socioeconomic backgrounds. As an educator and leader that my African American students could look up to and see themselves in. From my experiences in urban school districts, there were many distractions and students were not as focused as they should. It was important for me to see our students beyond their current situation and the color of their skin. I knew that each one of them had genius inside of them that needed to be brought to the forefront. I was able to share with them my struggles along with strategies that would allow them to have success at the high

school level. They understood that life would not be easy but having a solid academic foundation could change the trajectory of their life. I hope that by completing this study, I am able to share the lived experiences of African American males and their perceptions of their own academic achievement. Also, my data will also help others recognize the different variables that influence African American male academic achievement.

### **Interpretive Framework**

As I prepared for qualitative inquiry, it was necessary for me to identify the research paradigm as a bases for my perceptions throughout the research process. For this study, I used the interpretive framework social constructivist mindset. Social constructivists seek to understand the humans in the world in which they work through subjective development (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Lev Vygotsky, people develop information and psychological processes from environmental inputs, and their formed knowledge base eventually supports them in handling the conflicts around them (Taber, 2020). Social constructivists do not prioritize one reality or perspective over another, and they believe that all perceptions are accurate reflections of their respective individuals' realities, (Jung, 2019).

### **Philosophical Assumptions**

Philosophical assumptions direct research goals and outcomes. Philosophical assumptions are rooted in the communities in which we train and work (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) described philosophical assumptions are unavoidably present in qualitative inquiry, so their identification in the research process is necessary. Creswell and Poth (2018) identified that there are ontological assumptions, epistemological assumptions, axiological assumptions, and methodological assumptions. All researchers bring assumptions to the research process, but qualitative researchers are tasked with addressing these assumptions.

### ***Ontological Assumption***

Ontological assumption relates to the nature of reality and directs the capturing of reality through multiple views (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My research study focused on the utilization of numerous data sources to learn about and reported on the diverse realities of African American male students. Due to the sociocultural conditions that existed over the duration of this study, including a pandemic and increasing racial tensions, questionnaires, interviews and focus groups were conducted online to protect the physical and mental safety of the participants. Given the nature of this research, virtual interviews took place where the participants' felt comfortable rather than in a classroom or school environment. Physical distancing between the researcher and study participants was important for safety reasons which is also the reason the questionnaires was done electronically. However, for analytical reasons, individual semi-structured and focus group interviews were recorded.

### ***Epistemological Assumption***

The epistemological assumption in qualitative research entails the lessening of distance between the researcher and participants in order to depict a true depiction of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data was generated from multiple realities, I used questionnaires, individual semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews to collect subjective information from each participant. Additionally, throughout the research process, I used bracketing to set aside my own experiences and opinions to naively take in the individual realities and experiences of the SET participants (Moustakas, 1994), which supports the epistemological assumption. According to Patton (2015), it is through epistemological support that validity is generated.

### *Axiological Assumption*

Researchers bring values to the research process, but qualitative researchers are tasked with identifying these values (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Axiological assumption generates the acknowledgment of values and biases that were innately present within my role as the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To preserve openness and promote confidence among participants, I expressly stated my positionality. My experiences and prejudices were bracketed to allow the study's phenomena to develop spontaneously. The qualitative approach used in this study, which is distinguished by the use of inductive processes, enabled the presentation of several viewpoints on the experiences of African American male students, as well as their motives for academic success in high school.

### **Researcher's Role**

I have been an educator for 19 years holding K-12 certifications in teaching, special populations, career development, and school administration. I currently work in the Human Resources Department in a school district. Throughout my career as an educator, I have seen African American males struggle and succeed in public education. I have witnessed teachers make attempts to help their students to no avail. In this hermeneutic phenomenological study, I am the human instrument who disaggregated the data collected from questionnaires, interviews, and the focus group (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Although I worked previously worked in the district in which I will be completing my study, I do not have any direct contact with any students. Therefore, there was nothing that would represent a conflict of interest. I believe that everyone should be treated equally; however, I do not view my belief of equality as a bias for the study. It is critical to understand bias and how it influences research outcomes. (Bloomsfield et al., 2019).

As a Director of Human Resources and Equity for a school district, I am given the opportunity to implement equitable changes in the school district for African American male students. This study and the significance of the findings influenced the current position I hold as a central service administrator in the Human Resources Department. I am also the father of one African American male in North Carolina, as my son will have some of the similar lived experiences as the participants in the study.

I prepared myself in the study techniques that were necessary to follow through with the outline of the phenomenological design. My experience of being a central service and school administrator has allowed me multiple opportunities to interview adults with the intent to hire as well as interview students to understand their stories. My skills of data analysis have been developed through my current position and qualitative research courses at Liberty University.

### **Procedures**

In the procedures section, the steps used to conduct the study are outlined to a reasonable enough extent that the study could be replicated from these descriptions. This explanation includes necessary site permissions, information about securing Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, soliciting participants, the data collection and analysis plans by data source, and an explanation of how the study achieves triangulation.

### **Permissions**

For this study to be completed, I received permission from Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Appendix A). I also received permission from Greater Waltown United Holy Church Inc in Durham North Carolina to allow for recruiting (Appendix B). Greater Waltown United Holy Church was chosen due to it having one of the region's largest predominantly African-American congregations. After collaborating with the chair of the



dissertation committee and the methodologist to ensure that all requirements and expectations of the Liberty University IRB were satisfied, the application and its accompanying papers were submitted for institutional review.

The open-ended qualitative questionnaire was piloted for content and face validity after I gained complete permission from the university's IRB. The participant consent form (Appendix C) and the qualitative questionnaire were completed by former DPS students (Appendix D). Former DPS students gave constructive feedback on the data collection instrument. The feedback was then synthesized, and the instrument was calibrated to better align with the research purpose.

### **Recruitment Plan**

Greater Waltown United Holy Church Inc in Durham, North Carolina, is one of the region's largest predominantly African-American congregations. Which is why this church was used to recruit participants. I attended Sunday morning services with a booth set up in the church lobby to recruit participants before and after service. I also scheduled times to talk with the church's young adult's ministry about the study, which included members aged 18 to 35. Individuals interested in participating in the study were supplied with a summary of the research as well as a link and invitation to join a Zoom informative session at predefined times. Participants who attended the initial meeting were given the date, time of the virtual meeting.

The introductory Zoom session provided a comprehensive explanation of the study's purpose. I presented a summary of my personal, professional, and cultural background, the research topic, the proposed study, and the ramifications of the research. Participants were encouraged to ask questions to clarify the purpose and intent of the research, as well as to collect additional information required to make an educated decision about advancing as a willing participant in the study.

Participants who expressed interest in taking part in the research were briefed about the procedures for data collection, as well as the nature of the study and their position within the study. The analysis, storage, and use of participants' data was explained to them. Participants were informed that the focus group and interviews would be digitally recorded for transcribing purposes. Consent forms were issued at the conclusion of the initial Zoom session and returned to me once completed (Appendix C). This process was repeated until a total of 10 individuals were identified to take part in the study.

### **Data Collection Plan**

Data collection is a series of interrelated activities aimed at gathering good information to answer emerging research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Using multiple data collection methods to shed light on a theme is triangulating information and provides validity to their findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Also, multiple methods should be convenient to participants and facilitate openness (Heath et al., 2018). To ensure I developed a comprehensive understanding around the phenomena, triangulation was ensured; therefore, I used a questionnaire, interviews, and focus groups.

Although I am used three methods, the primary data collection method I used was informal interviews with an interactive process utilizing open-ended questions. I developed a series of questions in advance that aimed at evoking a comprehensive account of the person's experience of the phenomenon. I prepared alternate questions based on the responses given by the participants. Creating an atmosphere of trust was vital to the interview and important to this process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To build rapport with the participants, interviews began with social conversation with the intent to create a relaxed and trusting atmosphere. To ensure I began

the interview session with all biases removed, I engaged in the epoché process, which allows them to remove any biases that could potentially influence the interview (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Questionnaires Data Collection Approach**

The first data collection method data was the questionnaire, regarding the phenomena of this research study. A questionnaire, according to McLeod (2018) is a research data collection method used to gain information from respondents. The questionnaire results will be used to collect participant opinions on the topic. Using a qualitative, open-ended questionnaire, researchers may collect original data and anecdotes from study participants (Mertler, 2021). Additionally, surprising insights was revealed during focus groups and semi-structured individual interviews (Rivano et al., 2017). It also provided insight into the ability of the participants to reflect and willingness to share their descriptions.

The open-ended, qualitative questionnaire (Appendix E) was completed online by participants. Participants were emailed with a Google Form link of the electronic qualitative questionnaire. The email also provided m, instructions for completing the questionnaire. Participants were urged to reply as honestly and completely as possible to the questions and were instructed to take as much time as they need to complete the survey. Participants were urged to submit the Google Form within 48 hours of receiving it and once completed. The questionnaire will be intended to be completed in one sitting of no more than 30 minutes. Participants had to answer all questions on the Google Form, giving the researcher immediate access to the information supplied by each responder. The researcher recorded reflections using an audio recorder and handwritten notes after reviewing the survey responses.

According to Patton (2015), in qualitative research, credibility is built in part by ensuring that it is instrumentally trustworthy. This qualitative data collecting instrument was piloted for

critical input on both the form and content to verify face validity. The approved IRB approval letter reflects, I will pilot the instrument with at least 10 persons who satisfy the same or equivalent demographic characteristics as potential participants. Prior to research, the dissertation committee assessed and approved the instrument to strengthen its content validity. During the data analysis stages of the research project, the data obtained from the questionnaire gave more context and depth (Patton, 2015).

An analysis of the data gathered from the questionnaire allowed for categorizing of codes that later led to themes based on information given by each participant (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### *Questionnaire Questions*

1. Which high school(s) did you attend? Demographic
2. What years did you attend high school? Demographic
3. Age? Demographic
4. Describe, if any, the role your racial identity had on your daily interactions with teachers or other educators during your high school experience. SQ1
5. Describe, if any, events or occurrences during your high school experiences that occurred in your community that impacted your academic performance? CRQ
6. Depict, if any, events or occurrences directed toward you or other students during your high school experience that motivated you academically. SQ1
7. Based on your experiences in a high school, evaluate whether you or any other African American males experienced higher levels of conflict with their teachers because of the lack of relationship between the two. SQ2

8. Based on your experiences, what do you think are the most influential factors affecting the African American male population during your high school years in North Carolina? SQ1

Questions one through three share the student's demographics. Despite not being qualitative in nature, the first three questions aimed to acquire relevant data for the research. Questions four through eight asked respondents to think on and document their lived experiences at an urban school in North Carolina. These questions, are in line with the central research question and research sub-questions and were created to elicit a reflective journaling response on their lived experiences during high school.

### ***Questionnaire Data Analysis Plan***

Analysis of the data collected from questionnaires followed van Manen's (2015) approach to hermeneutic phenomenology qualitative data analysis. First, each participants' questionnaire was read thoroughly twice. During the second read all relevant statements and meaning units was detected and retrieved from the text during the second read (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Each participant's most significant statements and ideas were extracted as they were reviewed. After two reviews of extracted data, significant statements and meaning units were categorized based on similarity of response or experience. After the codes were organized, creative variation was used to identify the sub-themes emphasized throughout the participants' statements and responses (Maher & Dertadian, 2018). The sub-themes were then hermeneutically juxtaposed into three domains and subdivided hermeneutically. The essential themes were developed by hermeneutically combining the significant statements, meaning units, codes, and emergent sub-themes from the interviews with the information gathered from the focus group and interviews.

## **Individual Interviews Data Collection Approach**

The primary source of data collection for this research study were from interviews. It was essential for researcher to cultivate specialized research skills in order to get the lived experiences of the participants without compromising the integrity of the data (McGrath et al., 2018). Once participants confirmed their willingness to participate, interviews were conducted. The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and recorded electronically using Zoom. The participants were interviewed in a setting they were most comfortable. Informal interviews were conducted. The informal interview is designed to receive subjective responses from persons regarding a particular phenomenon they have experienced (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). According to Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik (2021), informal interview questions (Appendix F) focuses on the responses of the participants and allows the researcher to probe the responses from the participants.

### ***Individual Interview Questions***

1. Please introduce yourself to me, as if we just met one another. KB
2. Where did you attend high school? KB
3. What year did you graduate? Personal Data KB
4. How do you see yourself today, in terms of being an African American male? CRQ
5. Describe any significant experiences in your life that have influenced you academically, and what made them significant? SQ1
6. What influence has your family had on you academically? SQ3
7. Who has had the largest influence in your life academically? SQ3
8. What if anything would you change about yourself if you could? CRQ
9. What role has being an African American male had on your academic achievement? SQ2

10. Research and data show in North Carolina public schools the academic achievement gap is 27%. Why do you believe that African American males in High School are performing below their peers academically? SQ2

11. What opportunities were provided to you that assisted with your academic achievement?  
SQ1

The first five questions are knowledge-based (Patton, 2015). They are low level, non-threatening questions, and ideally used to help build rapport between the participant and the researcher (Patton, 2015). For each of the participant, the questions will remain the same.

Daily et al. (2019) assert that both school climate and family environment and structure have a strong direct effect on academic achievement. Therefore, it was important to ask questions that would help the participants reflect on the role their family environments played in their academic achievement and other factors that could have impacted their academic achievement. Questions six and seven were designed for these purposes.

Questions eight, nine and ten invited participants to reflect on their identities and the outcomes of those that looked like them. Racial identity is regarded as a multidimensional construct, and one of its aspects, racial centrality, has been conceptualized and operationalized (Seaton & Iida., 2019). Racial centrality is the degree to which race is part of an individual's identity in one's self (Thomas et al., 2021). Yip (2018) suggested there is a strong correlation between academic achievement and racial identity.

It is now widely accepted that, to succeed in the future, all young people must have the opportunity to develop critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, and communication competencies skills (Burns et al, 2019). These opportunities can no longer be limited to the privileged few, while disparities in students' learning opportunities remain a chronic issue.

Question eleven invites the participants to reflect on the opportunities they were provided and those to which they may not have had access to assist with their academic achievement.

### ***Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan***

van Manen's (2015) method for hermeneutic phenomenology qualitative data analysis was used to analyze the information gathered from the interviews. The entirety of the interview with every participant were reviewed twice from beginning to end. Zoom transcription software was used to transcribe the interview recordings. Each interview was transcribed and thoroughly read twice. All relevant statements and meaning units were identified and retrieved from the text during the second read (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Each participant's most significant statements and ideas was compiled and examined.

Significant statements and meaningful units were categorized based on similarity of reaction or experience after two reviews of the extracted data. After comments and responses by participants were sorted into categories to reveal sub-themes themes (Maher & Dertadian, 2018). The sub-themes were then be juxtaposed into the three domains and subdivided hermeneutically. The essential themes were developed by hermeneutically combining the significant statements, meaning units, codes, and emergent sub-themes from the interviews with the information gathered from the questionnaire and focus groups.

### **Focus Groups Data Collection Approach**

Focus groups were the final data collection method used in this study. The focus group were used for this study to elicit a richer perspective about the research problem from the participant and aimed at collecting high-quality data (Patton, 2015). A focus group is a multi-participant conversation conducted by a researcher with the purpose of collecting qualitative data about a specific phenomenon (Patton, 2015). Focus grouping's strength lies in the creation of this



collective data because of participant interaction with one another (Maher & Dertadian, 2018; Flynn et al., 2018). Richness of the data is increased by the presence of social dynamics and interactions between individuals (Nyumba et al., 2018). Focus groups aid in the development of deeper insights and understandings of phenomena (van Manen, 2015). These guided discussions had a more relaxed tone than most. (Guerrero & Xicola, 2018). This study was be enriched from the data collected in focus groups. The participants discussed their personal and academic experiences as African American male students.

For the purpose of this research, four to five individuals were assigned to one of three focus groups based on their scheduling availability. Each focus group met for a maximum of 60 minutes. Participants were asked to reply to five prepared questions (Appendix G) and invited to discuss each subject freely with one another during the focus group session. The researcher asked clarifying and elaborating questions. The Zoom meeting recording capability was used to capture all focus group responses. The Zoom transcription software was used to transcribe the focus group recording, note taking was kept to a minimum. The data gathered instrument will be the researcher and the focus group questions. Without written permission of participation, no focus group will be performed or recorded. After the focus group concluded, the researcher immediately takes reflection notes (both written, and audio recorded) on the session.

### ***Focus Group Questions***

1. What are some things educators need to know about African American male students?  
CRQ
2. What were the contributing factors to your success in school? SQ1
3. What role do you think being an African American male played in your education? SQ2

4. From your experiences, what motivates African American males to perform well academically? SQ2
5. How has being academically successful benefited you? SQ1

Questions one and two focus on the participants' perceptions of school. It is crucial to understanding the participants' perspectives of school and what contributed to their academic achievement. There are multiple variables that can impact a student's level of academic achievement (Daily et al., 2019). These questions were meant to promote deep introspection and to generate replies from participants which identified their lived experiences. This research study relied on an individual's perspective of those lived experiences in school.

Question three directly targeted the issue of the participants' identity, more specifically their identified race. The scope of the question is such that it welcomes a diverse array of responses from the participants. These replies generated pertinent follow-up questions. Geougis (2020) asserted there is a direct consequence of race and the emotional impact it creates for African American males, on their academic experience. The participants' experiences as African American males gave context for the learning activities and information that would support the group. This question was designed to provide participants a chance to elaborate on how their experiences as African American males in the school systems were shaped by factors, such as teacher quality, peer interactions, curriculum, pedagogy, and other factors.

Question four focused on the interpersonal interactions that drove participants to achieve high academic achievement. The question was intended to elicit student motivational sources. It invited participants to discuss why other African American males did not complete high school as well as explain what they feel are the underlying sources of motivation for African American males. (Konold et al., 2017; Degroote et al., 2019)

Question five was designed as an open-ended final question to elicit idealistic responses and discourse among participants (Patton, 2015). This final question served as an opportunity for participants to share their expert worldview of the phenomenon high achieving African American male. student engagement.

### ***Focus Group Data Analysis Plan***

The analysis of the focus group data followed van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology qualitative data analysis approach (2015). All recordings of the focus groups were viewed in their entirety twice. Using Zoom transcription software, the recordings of the focus groups were transcribed. Once transcribed, each transcription of the focus group was thoroughly read twice. All relevant statements and meaning units were detected and retrieved from the text during the second read (Tomaszewski et al., 2020).

Each participant's most significant statements and ideas were compiled and examined. Significant statements and meaning units were categorized based on similarity of reaction or experience following two reviews of extracted data. After the codes are organized, creative variation was used to find out the sub-themes that were emphasized throughout the participants' statements and responses (Maher & Dertadian, 2018). The sub-theme will then be juxtaposed into the three domains and subdivided hermeneutically. The essential themes were developed by hermeneutically combining the significant statements, meaning units, codes, and emergent sub-themes from the interviews with the information gathered from the questionnaire and interviews.

### **Data Synthesis**

The data analysis in this research study was van Manen's (2015) approach to hermeneutic phenomenology qualitative data analysis. All relevant statements or meaning units were identified following two extensive reviews of all collected data. Meaning units are any passage

associated with the topic being studied (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Following the identification of meaning units and noteworthy statements, the data was coded. In qualitative research, coding is the process of gradually transforming raw data into functional, interconnected, and interpretive data (Maher & Dertadian, 2018). After the data was coded, it was categorized and organized. The sub-themes were produced based on the synthesis of coded data and the basic themes were produced via iterations of the subthemes. Literature defines themes as features that recur regularly in writing (van Manen, 2015). Finally, textual, structural, and composite descriptions of the academic accomplishments of the participants were utilized to generate policy and practice implications. The outlined data analysis process is described in greater detail in the following section.

### ***Identifying Significant Statements and Meaning Units***

The initial phase of analysis consisted of a deep dive into the collected data. During the initial text analysis, memoing and phenomenological reflection were conducted. According to McGrath (2021), one of the advantages of memoing is that it facilitates the researcher's transition from raw facts to the abstracted. This explains the events under investigation in their specific context. McGrath's (2021), goes on to say researchers may "immerse" themselves in their work, discover new meanings, contemplate more deeply, and keep their thoughts and ideas flowing more smoothly by using memos.

Using the questionnaires, transcripts, and recordings, the researcher will isolated all significant statements from the data collected. Using van Manen's (2015) selective approach for isolating thematic aspects of a phenomenon, all significant statements pertaining to student engagement (behavioral, cognitive, or affective) or self-determination theory's basic

psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) will be extracted into essential textual elements, or meaning units (Tomaszewski et al., 2020).

Hermeneutic phenomenology is characterized using the hermeneutic circle. The hermeneutic circle provides equilibrium to the study since it permits researchers to refer to a phenomenon holistically and by its many sections or components (van Manen, 2015). Suddick et al., (2020) agreed that it is easier to find and interpret significance when scholars compare and contrast the pieces with the whole and vice versa. In this study, the hermeneutic circle was used to analyze the participants' academic experiences.

### ***Identification and Development of Essential Themes***

From a phenomenological standpoint, the codes derived from meaning in the first analysis conceptualized concepts and rendered the text more "approachable" (van Manen, 2015). However, the second part of the data analysis condensed the codes into themes via creative variation in order to generate important themes (Zahavi, 2019). Based on the domains of the African American male student 's academic experience and social equity theory. This analysis of themes were both imaginative and iterative due to the nature of hermeneutic phenomenology (van Manen, 2015).

According to van Manen (2015), themes are interpreted, reoccurring elements of the collected data that guides the study and writing process. van Manen (2015) noted that themes are used in various disciplines in the humanities, art, and literary criticism. Themes are also characterized in literature as recurrent language or concepts identified in the gathered material, and it offers structure to the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 2015). Focus was placed on the essential themes, or those themes that speak to the "whatness" or "essence" of a phenomena (van Manen, 2015), due to their essential relevance to the African American male

student academic experience and social equity theory. After developing important themes, coded meaning units were cross-referenced with original significant statements and allocated to thematically relevant groups. After aligning and organizing the data, the phenomenological themes were interpreted, giving them empirical voice and authority (van Manen, 2015).

### ***Development of Interpretations and Implications***

Responses from the participants serve as the hermeneutic text from which descriptions of the student academic achievement was formed and analyzed. These descriptions and in NVivo descriptions were aligned thematically as they related to African American male student academic experience and the social equity theory. Interpretations and consequences for policy and practice were articulated using the hermeneutic circle. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), structural and textual descriptions are indicative of the setting and context of an occurrence, making them valuable for detecting the associated implications. The structure and textual descriptions are linked existentially to enhance comprehension of how African American student academic achievement and are perceived by participants' lived experiences (van Manen, 2015). In terms of both policy and practical ramifications, the objective is to define the essence of student academic achievement for African American males attending urban public schools. Lastly, the theoretical and empirical implications were synthesized to move the social equity theory and the African American male academic experience phenomenon forward.

### **Trustworthiness**

The degree of confidence in data, interpretation, and procedures employed to assure the quality of a research is referred to as the study's trustworthiness (Adler, 2022). The concepts of credibility, reliability, transferability, and confirmability are what trustworthiness aims to address (Stenfors et al., 2020). Whether or not the information is credible determines the validity of all

data gathered (Alder, 2022). It is important to know that the data and information gathered are correct and reliable.

### **Credibility**

Credibility was ensured by using multiple types of data for accurate support (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The degree of agreement between participants and the researcher were used to determine how credible and acceptable a study report is (Stahl et al., 2020). Compiling many pieces of data and finding recurring themes is how credibility is established (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study utilized three different types of data collection. Data was collected from questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups in order to identify common themes. Creswell and Poth (2018) asserted reliability is ensured by detailed field notes, quality recording of interviews, and accurate transcription; all of which were used in this study.

### **Transferability**

Creswell and Poth (2018) asserted that to ensure that findings are transferable from one researcher to another and from one study to another, rich and thick description is necessary. Rich, detailed descriptions allow readers to transfer information to different settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). In this study, a digital journal was kept to record thoughts, descriptions, and details of the interviews, interviewees, and other pertinent information.

### **Dependability**

The degree to which research procedures are recorded, enabled others outside the study to monitor, check, and critique the research process and, is referred to as dependability (Stenfors et al., 2020). Dependability and conformability were handled by rich, thorough descriptions, which was accomplished by gathering of data in a variety of formats. Digital journals were used to give comprehensive descriptions, and collected using digital journals and interviews. Precise,

professional transcripts of the interviews were collected. Dependability was ensured as a result of using the journals, to bracket myself out of the phenomenon and incorporate rich, thick descriptions of the events, the interview, the interviewee, and my own judgements and biases (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability was also be addressed in this study. To ensure that the findings were based on the words of the participants rather than my own. (Stahl et al., 2020). As a result, I used researcher epoché to ascertain my own experiences and prejudices about the study. To guarantee the robustness of my epoché, I maintained a reflective record of my research experiences. Additionally, confirmability and reliability issues were addressed in detailed explanations of topics and member verification. As a result, I conducted member verification in this research study. After I completed member verification, I gave a transcript of the interviews to each participant. The participants were then given the opportunity to examine the transcripts for accuracy, and if any mistakes were discovered, I made edits to accurately represent what each participant stated.

### **Ethical Considerations**

It is critical that this research be undertaken with the utmost ethical concern. I was given appropriate clearance from Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to initiating this research endeavor. All research participants were encouraged to ask questions during the study to aid in their decision-making, comprehension, and involvement. Informed consent were given to each participant in the study. The informed consent gave participants the information they needed to make an educated decision about whether or not to take part in the



study, have had the opportunity to do so, and were not being coerced into taking part (Adler, 2022).

There is no damage to anyone as result of their participation in this research. Their identities are omitted from any discussion or publishing. All audio recordings, Google Form surveys, and transcripts of interviews, focus groups, and reflections have been saved on a separate external hard drive and a cloud server that are both passwords secured. Additionally, all handwritten notes were saved and stored in a brown document envelope that is sealed. The envelopes will be securely kept within a filing cabinet. Without the participant's approval, no other research study or purpose will be conducted using the participant's source data. Additionally, five years following final clearance by the study committee, all recorded materials will be deleted, removing any possible dangers associated with confidentiality

### **Summary**

This chapter's purpose was to lay out the qualitative phenomenological study to be used to address the research questions. The study's procedures, study participants, data collection, and data analysis were all outlined in this chapter. This research was based on reliable and trustworthy participants, as well as dependable and ethical research methods. The goal of the qualitative researcher was to gain comprehension and understanding, hence the researcher employed a methodology that involved isolating and identifying phenomena/categories. (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). The researcher's bias, as well as the questions or conversations posed, were be eliminated in this study.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of African American males, who attended urban high schools, concerning their academic achievement in North Carolina. My goal is to share the experiences which influenced the academic achievement of these former students. This chapter provides a description of the 10 research participants, and the collected data displayed in the tables by themes. This chapter will also respond to the researcher's central question, sub-questions, and conclude with a summary of the research findings.

### **Participants**

A total of 10 former DPS students participated in this research study (Table 1). Purposeful sampling was utilized to identify study participants. Each participant met study eligibility requirements for this study, which included: identifying as African American male, formerly enrolled in a DPS high school for at least two academic years prior to leaving or graduating school, and having not been out of school more than 10 years and maintained minimum unweighted grade point average of 3.0. Participants who attended information sessions at Greater Waltown United Holy Church Inc. were reviewed and selected. The sample included 10 African American males, who attended seven different DPS high schools and graduated from high school between 2015 and 2022. Each participant graduated from high school. Of the 10 participants, four are currently attending four-year universities, while six have graduated from four-year universities. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym throughout this study. (See Table 1)

**Table 1***Research Participants*

<b>Participants Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Years Attended</b>	<b>HS Outcome</b>
<b>Shamar</b>	Male	African American	22	2015-2019	Graduated
<b>Patrick</b>	Male	African American	22	2015-2019	Graduated
<b>Duane</b>	Male	African American	20	2016-2020	Graduated
<b>Cory</b>	Male	African American	19	2018-2022	Graduated
<b>Michael</b>	Male	African American	25	2012-2016	Graduated
<b>Shaun</b>	Male	African American	25	2011-2015	Graduated
<b>Bryan</b>	Male	African American	21	2016-2020	Graduated
<b>Charles</b>	Male	African American	22	2015-2019	Graduated
<b>Edward</b>	Male	African American	26	2011-2015	Graduated
<b>Kevin</b>	Male	African American	25	2012-2016	Graduated

**Shamar**

Shamar, a 22-year-old man, expressed enthusiasm in taking part in the research study. During all four years of his high school career, Shamar attended one of the area's specialist high schools. When asked why he chose a specialty school over a traditional high school, Shamar stated: "that he believed the specialty school would better prepare him for college than a traditional high school". When asked about his educational experiences, this future environmentalist said, "I consider myself fortunate; other students were not as well prepared as I was when I enrolled at North Carolina State University." Shamar comes from a large family, which he says is the reason why he considers himself an introvert.

While a student, Shamar would remain in his room at their so-called "small house" since he had six sisters, and most of them had children who also resided at the house. Shamar later said, "When there were people at the house, I found myself not wanting to come out of the room a lot, which is critical." Shamar's family conditions were also motivational, since "a couple of them have gone to college, but none of them have graduated. It provided me with a lot of inspiration, making me want to excel and perform well in school."

### **Patrick**

Patrick is a college student who is a 22-year-old man studying business at a four-year university. This subject piqued his interest while he was still in high school, was a charming young man. Patrick referred to himself as "an intelligent young Black man trying to figure out the way of the world." Patrick felt as if he had "seen the best of both worlds" since he had the opportunity to attend two different high schools throughout his high school years. He attended a school where he believed resources and opportunities were abundant, but because he was a Black male, he was not granted the same access to the resources and opportunities as his peers. When he transferred schools, he was granted access to the resources and opportunities; however, the resources and opportunities available to him did not compare to previous schools, which were superior. Given all of this, Patrick turned to the services that were available to him in his community for assistance. He attributes his passion and willingness to seek out further resources to the fact that his mother instilled such qualities in him. "She told me, no one is going to give you anything," Patrick stated. It was because of this passion and commitment that Patrick was able to maintain his concentration in school and get a scholarship to attend the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

**Duane**

Duane was an outspoken 21-year-old man. He graduated from high school in the year 2020 and is now enrolled in a four-year university. Over his time there, he has been awarded two paid internships during the summers for the last two years. He also won several engineering contests on campus. Duane does not believe that the direction his life is taking is not a representation of the positive experiences he had while in high school. When I asked Duane about his high school experiences, he was not pleased. He revealed "I was treated like a second-class citizen" and "every slight mistake you make, you would instantly go to suspension or weeks out of school and so you have always had to be careful" in the questionnaire, semi-structured interview and focus group about the school administration. These feelings were also something that he encountered in his interactions with teachers.

Even though Duane performed well academically, he had the impression that he was treated differently just because he was a Black male. He reported how the prior winners of a science competition at his school were awarded trophies, but the year he won, the winner was not given a trophy or any form of recognition for their achievement. The following year, though, a White female won the same competition and was awarded a prize. The realization that "I have to work twice as hard just to be equal to my White counterparts" was the lesson that Duane took away from this experience, and it pushed him to continue through high school, achieve academic excellence, and "stand out even as a Black man.

**Cory**

Cory, a 19-year-old man who graduated in 2022, was incredibly intelligent yet quiet. Over the course of his four years in high school, he split his time between two separate high schools. Cory was well aware of the stereotypes that society tends to make about Black men in

general. He reported, “I’m doing my part to improve the stereotype that has been placed upon us.” Corey attended two separate schools. He recognized at both schools how the administrators were “always harder on students of color and allowed Whites to get away with the same acts”. Cory’s relationships with his teachers were always positive, but it wasn’t until his final year of high school that he met the English teacher who would forever alter the course of his education. He acknowledged that his parents, particularly his mother, had an important role in his academic success from a young age up until the present. To that point, he stated, “My parents have been there my whole life,” but it wasn’t until he was in his senior year of high school that he had a teacher who had high expectations for him as a young Black man and would push him to do better in school. According to Cory, the teacher would say things to him like, “You failed this, how can I help you understand the information, so you won’t fail the next time?” Corey attributes his current concentration as a student at a four-year college to his relationship with that teacher and his parents.

### **Michael**

Michael, a charismatic and friendly 25-year-old young man who graduated in 2016. Michael is a professional basketball player who currently resides and plays in another country. Michael was thrilled to be able to take part in the research study during his off-season. Michael acknowledged that there were times when he saw education in a less-than-optimistic light. Michael did not recognize the significance of education because he was adopted at an early age. He reported to me, “I understood that you have to go to school, and you have to graduate.” He credits his adoptive parents with helping him shift his perspective on education and the importance of school. He was honest and admitted that he occasionally found it difficult “to find

ways to come to school, or having to walk to school, or just not feeling like waking up early to come to school, or just not wanting to come to school”.

He was aware of the significance of education because he was aware that to continue playing basketball in school and college, he needed to keep his grade point average above a particular threshold. “It was important to be able to play basketball and have something to look forward to after graduating.” Michael was confident in his abilities as a basketball player, so he turned to the guidance counselors at his high school for support. According to Michael, “I suppose you can say that they looked out for me in terms of being understanding and letting me make mistakes but helping me along the way.”

### **Shaun**

Shaun is a 25-year-old, vibrant, and sociable young man. Shaun is currently working as an educator at the same school from which he graduated in 2015. Shaun was of the opinion that the fact that he is a young Black boy in today’s society has had a generational effect on him. “I feel like generation-wise, I kind of setback,” said Shaun. He elaborated on that by stating that he had family members who had graduated from high school but had not continued their education beyond high school. On the other hand, the fact that they did not complete college did not affect the way in which they “demanded excellence” from him. He explained that knowing his grandfather would reward him monetarily for academic success had encouraged him to maintain a high grade point average.

Shaun shared, “I always wanted to make it so that I was on the A honor roll because my parents did not really allow C’s or anything under that in the house.” That served as the impetus for him to work hard in high school and achieve academic success. Shaun made it a point to surround himself with other students who shared his outlook and put a premium on their

education. They were all competitive people who would compete with one another to see who could get the highest grade so that they could brag about it. Shaun said, “I would tell one of my friends like, all right, I’m gonna get a higher grade on the test and he might actually get a higher grade on the test to me, but next week I’m going to do better.

### **Bryan**

Bryan graduated from high school in 2020 and is currently enrolled in a four-year university. Bryan, a 21-year-old male, was thoughtful and quiet. Bryan ensured that every response he offered was well-considered and relevant to his experiences in high school. Bryan reflects on the challenges he faced in school due to the inability of his teachers to understand him as a Black male. Bryan said, “Some teachers may not understand what it’s like to be an African American. Even if they are aware of it, they might not be able to put themselves in our position, which will inevitably lead to confrontation.” Bryan believed that this extended to the teaching materials as well. African American classmates who did not see the relevance of what we were learning in class frequently clashed with the teacher due to their teaching approach, according to Bryan.

Even though Bryan was successful in high school and went through the same experiences that his classmates had, Bryan’s senior year of high school was marked by an intense bout of depression. While he was experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic, the colleges and universities to which he had applied did not respond to him in a timely manner, whereas his peers were receiving admission letters. During this difficult moment, Bryan’s mother who was raising three children alone, reminded him to keep his eyes on the prize at and push through this. Bryan was able to beat his depression and gain admission to the college of his choosing, where he is now working as a resident assistant.



**Charles**

Charles was a 22-year-old young man who graduated from high school in 2016. Charles was cordial and genuine. Recently, he received his bachelor's degree in business from a prestigious university. Charles considers himself to be a "powerful and motivated" member of his community. Charles gave open and honest feedback about how society views Black men and the stereotypes that are attached to them. He considers "overcoming stereotypes" to be one of the most difficult challenges he has faced and continues to face in his life. Simply because he was a Black male, he believed that he needed to put in twice as much effort as his peers. Charles's family had a significant role in ensuring that he was able to overcome those obstacles; the thing that most drove Charles was when he would see his peers earning prizes and recognition for their achievements. Charles shared "Seeing my friends in different programs being rewarded for their academic excellence impacted me to do better so I can be celebrated like my peers". Hence, it can be concluded that Charles had a positive experience in school. He attended an institution where many of the students and staff looked like him and were able to empathize with the challenges he faced since they faced similar obstacles themselves.

**Edward**

Edward graduated from high school in 2015 and is a graduate of a four-year university that he attended on a football scholarship. Edward, a 26-year-old young man, was straightforward and honest. He had a great deal of affection for his high school and was happy to share the fact that during his time there, "I never had a teacher of any color other than Black. I personally feel they can adapt and understand your point of view better". Tragic events occurred during Edward's years in high school, even though he liked his school and was excellent both

academically and athletically. Edward shared that “death and tragedies were a big part of what happened while I was in school, because I knew them, and I knew them very well.”

Edward would use the unfortunate events that occurred to him while he was in school as driving forces to propel him into success. Edward also had a support structure at home, and he shared his parents’ mindset regarding education, which was that “you will go to college with no questions asked, and you will do what you’re supposed to do when other people don’t do it, period”. Because of this, Edward was able to graduate at the top of his class and earn academic as well as sports scholarships. This experience left an enduring impression on Edward.

### **Kevin**

Kevin was a personable, and passionate 26-year-old young man. Kevin is employed by a radio station in the dual roles of production manager and disc jockey. In 2016, Kevin graduated from high school. Kevin had great things to say about his school, specifically his teachers. Kevin shared “Attending a predominantly Black school made it much easier for me as an African American male to connect with most of my teachers who were African American as well”. As a result of this, Kevin did not have any trouble developing relationships with his teachers, whereas other students did.

When asked about a significant experience that occurred while he was attending school, Kevin recounted the story of how he wanted “to go to college and play football.” His high school’s football team won quite a few games. The success that the football team experienced on the field flowed over into Kevin’s academic life, and as a result, he was able to attend a four-year university of his choosing to fulfill his lifelong dream. Kevin talked very favorably of his parents and acknowledged that, even though they did not complete their education, they desired “more” for him. Kevin also attributes his success to a school administrator who had high

expectations for him and gave him the opportunity to take on leadership roles inside the school. This administrator helped Kevin develop his leadership skills.

### **Results**

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of African American males, who attended urban high schools, concerning their academic achievement in North Carolina. The ten voluntary research participants completed open-ended qualitative questionnaires, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews to capture data for this study. Each of the 10 participants was asked to check the accuracy of the focus group and semi-structured interview transcripts to ensure trustworthiness and respondent validation. The participants in the research study clarified and validated the validity of their transcripts.

The questionnaire was read thoroughly twice, during the second reading all relevant statements and meaning units were detected and retrieved from the text (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). The focus group and semi-structured interview recordings and transcripts were thoroughly reviewed in accordance with van Manen's (2015) method for analyzing hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative data. All significant statements related to social equity theory's direct influences, signal influences, and social processes were identified and manually coded. These codes were then categorized and arranged based on codes found in the collected data that were similar or related. Using imaginative variation, the codes were condensed into four main themes and 10 sub-themes (See Table 2).

Statements that were not thought to be important to the purpose of the study were found and removed. Adhering to the principles of the hermeneutic circle, significant statements were juxtaposed, identified codes, various forms of student academic experiences, and the research

central question and sub-questions with the deduced essential themes to interpret the student academic experiences for the research participants. Curriculum, relationships, school-related experiences, and society-related factors were the four essential themes that emerged from the research data.

**Table 2**

*Essential Themes, Sub Themes and Codes*

Essential Theme	Sub-Themes	Codes	Frequency
Academics	Classroom Culture Created by the Teacher	Positive impact on students	18
		Negative Impact on Students	13
	Curriculum	Low Expectations	25
		Not relevant	10
		Lack of Culturally Responsiveness	26
		Slow Pace	8
Relationships	Teachers/Staff	Motivators	7
		Discouragers	11
		Coaches	14
		School Counselor	5
	Friends	Competition	12
		Supporter	19
		Influence	9
	Family	Care	7
		Love	15
		High Expectations	17
Mother		36	
School Experiences	Extra-Curricular Activities	Clubs	12
		Sports	23
	Intangible	Stereotypes	30
		Suspensions	16

		Climate and Culture	21
		Transportation	5
		Opportunities	6
		Access	3
	Tangible	Resources	8
		Awards and Recognition	22
Non-School Experiences	Adverse Childhood Experiences	Tragedy	3
		Living Environment	16
	Community Resources	Mentors	8
		Afterschool Programs	12
	Social Media	Instagram	17

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### Theme 1: Academic Experience

The research participants reported the teacher's disposition, the culture, and the climate of the classroom, as well as the teacher's knowledge of culturally responsive instruction enhanced or thwarted academic experience in the classroom. All participants agreed with Kevin when he said: "They need to try and understand us as a person and our culture, don't judge us by how we look or our hair. Learn how to teach me as a Black male, don't just write us off, help us". An overview of the subthemes and *Vivo* quotes for theme one is provided in Table 3.

**Table 3**

#### *Academics: Subthemes, Codes, and In Vivo Quotes*

Classroom Culture Created by Teacher	Positive Impact	"He actually pushed me to get ready for college."
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	Negative Impact	“I had teachers that didn’t understand me as a person, and didn’t care”
	Low Expectations	“I had teachers who didn’t expect much from me just because I am a Black male.”
Curriculum	Not Relevant	“I needed teachers to make what I was learning relevant to me, how am I going to use this outside of the classroom”
	Lack of Culturally Responsiveness	“Teachers didn’t understand our culture, to help us learn”
	Slow Pace	“I wanted to move forward with doing the work, but the teacher would always say wait for your peers to finish.”

### ***Sub-theme I: Classroom Culture Created by the Teacher***

Cory acknowledged his teacher's classroom culture and climate as one of being prepared for after you graduate “He actually pushed me to get ready for college.” In contrast, Shamar shared he felt his classroom culture was lacking care. “I had teachers that didn’t understand me as a person, and didn’t care.” Kevin expressed how he did not have to work as hard as his White peers. “I had teachers who didn’t expect much from me just because I am a Black male.”

### *Sub-theme II Curriculum*

Participants did not share a specific type of learning style that worked best for them, but the consensus was they wanted the information learned to be meaningful and relevant to them. Duane stated, “I needed teachers to make what I was learning relevant to me, how am I going to use this outside of the classroom.” Bryan affirmed this statement by saying “Teachers didn’t understand our culture, to help us learn.” Patrick had the desire for his lessons to be more rigorous. He stated, “I wanted to move forward with doing the work, but the teacher would always say wait for your peers to finish.”

### **Theme 2: Relationships**

The collected data disclosed that relationships play a pivotal role in the academic experiences of all participants. Relationships with teachers, staff, friends, and family either will motivate and support or discourage the student. Michael said, “Relationships are key in life and school, making connections is key” Charles and Shaun thought the connection with their friends was significant. While Edward expressed that his relationship with his family was paramount. Although Duane emphasized the importance of the role of the teacher/staff-student relationship, he acknowledged that all relationships add value to oneself and that the academic experience was important. An overview of the subthemes and Vivo quotes for theme two is provided in Table 4.

**Table 4**

*Relationships: Subthemes, Codes, and In Vivo Quotes*

Teachers/Staff	Motivators	
		“Teachers were continuously saying you will go to college.”

	Discouragers	“If the teachers felt like we were not trying they would write us off and not care about us, without knowing what we could have been going through that day.”
	Coaches	“I knew the coaches would look after me and support me no matter what was going on in school or at home, I know he had my back.”
	School Counselor	“She would say come sit with her and she would look over my work, talk me through all the steps, and help me with the stuff that teachers wouldn’t break down for me.”
Friends	Competition	“We all used to compete to see who would get the best grade on tests”
	Supportive	“We created a brotherhood to help each other with whatever



Family	Challenges	<p>it is the other person needed we were in it together” “I was homeless, then was adopted by a family that loved and cared for me and made me who I am today”</p>
	Mother	<p>“My mom had to do a lot of things by herself, having to raise 3 kids by herself, but she made sure I did my school work because she wanted more for me than we had.”</p>
	High Expectations	<p>“My parents demanded excellence from me, in school and out of school, that’s what made the difference for me.”</p>

### ***Sub-theme I: Teachers/Staff***

The participants described their relationship with teachers and staff as either motivators or discouragements. Patrick shared he felt motivated when his teachers “were continuously saying you will go to college.” He felt as if college were a viable option for him. Conversely, Bryan’s perspective was, “If the teachers felt like we were not trying they would write us off and

not care about us without knowing what we could have been going through that day.” The majority of participants participated in sports and reported that their relationship with their coaches was instrumental to their academic experience. Shamar shared “I knew the coaches would look after me and support me no matter what is going on in school or at home, I know he had my back.” Patrick expressed similar sentiments for his school counselor saying, “She would say come sit with her and she would look over my work, talk me through all the steps, and help me with the stuff that teachers wouldn’t break down for me.”

### ***Sub-theme II: Friends***

Each participant discussed the role their friendships had on their academic achievement. All participants responded positively about their friendships. Kevin shared that he and his friends would compete for good grades, “We all used to compete to see who would get the best grade on test”. Bryan spoke to the bond that was shared between him and his friends “We created a brotherhood to help each other with whatever it is the other person needed we were in it together.”

### ***Sub-theme III: Family***

Participants shared the importance of family in their academic achievement in school. Three participants had challenges with the family, that they had to persevere through. Shamar shared that his greatest challenge was experiencing homelessness and struggling, “I was homeless, then was adopted by a family that loved and cared for me and made me who I am today.” Four of the participants had a two-parent household while in school, however, all participants shared that their mother had the greatest impact on their academic achievement. Duane shared, “My mom had to do a lot of things by herself, having to raise three kids by herself, but she made sure I did my schoolwork because she wanted more for me than we had.”

Cory’s parents instilled excellence as the standard for him, “My parents demanded excellence from me, in school and out of school, that’s what made the difference for me.”

### **Theme 3: School Related Experiences**

Each participant shared several non-instructional factors that either enhanced their academic achievement or challenged it. Participation in extracurricular activities as well as intangible and tangible factors were cited as impactful. Michael acknowledged “Although my academic achievement level was high in the classroom there were other things at the school that still impacted me.” An overview of the subthemes and Vivo quotes for theme three is provided in Table 5.

**Table 5**

*School Related: Subthemes, Codes, and In Vivo Quotes*

Extra-Curricular Activities	Clubs	“I felt like being in clubs after school was a great opportunity to better yourself and your academics.”
	Sports	“Winning the 2013 football state championship changed my outlook on school, I was like if I work this hard in class I and win in there too.”
Intangible	Stereotypes	“Teachers would judge us based on what our hair and

		clothes looked like when I am not a thug just because of what I am wearing or the style of my hair.”
	Suspensions	“They would suspend Black students more than the White students for the same act, which was not right just because they we are Black”
	Transportation	“Sometimes I had to figure out how I was going to get to school because the bus would come too early.”
	Opportunities	“We aren’t given the same opportunities as White students when we are just as smart.”
Tangibles	Resources	“The schools with the best scores are given the most resources to help their student succeed.”
	Awards and Recognition	“Receiving awards and being recognized for doing well

motivated me to continue to  
do well in school”

### ***Sub-theme I: Extra-Curricular Activities***

Participants asserted the role extra-curricular activities played in their overall academic achievement. Shaun used clubs to enhance and utilize what was learned in class. He clarified, “I felt like being in clubs after school was a great opportunity to better yourself and your academics.” Charles shared how he took the success on the football field and translated it to the classroom, “Winning the 2013 football state championship changed my outlook on school, I was like if I work this hard in class I and win in there too.”

### ***Sub-theme II: Intangibles***

Each participant encountered intangibles in school that played a role in their academic achievement. One consistent intangible was facing the stereotypes placed on them by society. Cory shared how teachers supported the stereotypes, “Teachers would judge us based on what our hair and clothes looked like, when I am not a thug just because of what I am wearing or the style of my hair.” Duane noticed that the Black males in school were treated differently, “They [school administrators] would suspend Black students more than the White students for the same act, which was not right just because they we are Black.” Edward spoke to the struggle of transportation, “Sometimes I had to figure out how I was going to get to school, because the bus would come too early.” Shamar recognized that being Black was a disadvantage. He expressed that obtaining good grades in school does not always translate into equitable opportunities, “We aren’t given the same opportunities as White students when we are just as smart.”

### ***Sub-theme III: Tangible***

Participants recognize that schools with a higher percentage of Black students did not receive the same resources as schools with a larger White population. According to Patrick, “The schools with the best scores are given the most resources to help their student succeed.” Shamar shared that being affirmed and seeing others recognized impacted his academic achievement “Receiving awards and being recognized for doing well motivated me to continue to do well in school.”

#### **Theme 4: Non-School Related Experiences**

Participants acknowledged that their academic achievement was also impacted by factors not related to school. They discussed having to deal with tragedy and growing up in a community that felt unsafe at times. Michael expressed “Some people do not realize how hard it is to be a Black male, we get killed more than others and we do not always live in the best neighbors.” Bryan shared how having a mentor outside of school impacted his academic achievement “My mentor was the best, he still checks on me now and I have graduated college.” Edward shared how social media can impact academic achievement “Growing up in this generation is hard to focus at times because everything is on social media, good or bad it is there”. An overview of the subthemes and Vivo quotes for theme four is provided in Table 6.

**Table 6**

*Non-School Related Experiences: Subthemes, Codes, and In Vivo Quotes*

<i>Subthemes, Codes, and In Vivo Quotes</i>		
Adverse Childhood Experiences	Tragedy	“Having family members that are older I can understand, but to see my friends die that are my age is hard on a person in high school.”
	Living Environment	“I had to stay focused although being surrounded by

		gangs and violence in my neighborhood, I knew I couldn't get caught up in that, you know what I mean."
Community Resources	Mentorship	"I didn't have a father in the home, so my mentor from the leadership program was there for me to talk to when needed."
	Afterschool Programs	"The community centers in my neighborhood helped keep me out of trouble."
Social Media	Instagram	"Students see pictures on Instagram and other social media outlets and are like, they did not go to school so I don't need school."

### ***Sub-theme I: Adverse Childhood Experiences***

Participants shared that growing up African American is challenging and being an African American male compounds those challenges. They also agreed that experiencing tragedy as well as their overall living environment impacted how well they performed academically. Duane shared that he experienced tragedies while in school that he felt he should not have had to encounter. "Having family members that are older I can understand, but to see my friends die that are my age is hard on a person in high school." Shamar echoed Duane's sentiments and stated, "We see young Black males being killed by cops as if it is ok and it's not." Bryan shared that he participated in extra-curricular activities to avoid gangs and violence in his neighborhood "I had to stay focused although being surrounded by gangs and violence in my neighborhood, I knew I couldn't get caught up in that, you know what I mean."

### ***Sub-theme II: Community Resources***

Participants shared that they appreciated being in a community that provided resources that enhanced their academic achievement. Michael shared that being part of a leadership program provided him with invaluable experiences such as providing a male figure in his life. He stated, “I didn’t have a father in the home, so my mentor from the leadership program was there for me to talk to when needed.” Shamar also realized the importance of his community. He stated, “The community center in the neighborhood kept a lot of out of trouble, I am not going to lie if it had it not been there I would not be here today.

### ***Sub-theme III: Social Media***

Each participant acknowledged they had at least one social media account, with the Instagram being the most popular. Charles shared that social media can be a dichotomy of good and bad “I have seen my friends post positive and crazy things on social media.” Kevin added that social media can give a false sense of reality and discourage educational progression at times. “Students see pictures on Instagram and other social media outlets and are like, they did not go to school so I don’t need school.”

### **Research Question Responses**

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of African American males, who attended urban high schools, concerning their academic achievement in North Carolina. This research study examined the academic achievement of these former students via one central research question and three sub-questions. The central research question uncovered participants’ overall lived experiences of African American males and its impact on their academic achievement. The three sub-questions explored the specific areas of the academic achievement of African-American males. Table 7 provides an



overview of how the themes are addressed and related to the central research question and the sub-questions.

**Table 7**

*Overview of Themes & Research Questions*

Theme	Research Questions	Summary of Findings
Academic Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Central Research Question</li> <li>▪ Sub-Question 1</li> <li>▪ Sub-Question 2</li> </ul>	<p>Participants indicated that classroom experiences impacted their academic achievement both positively and negatively experiences in the classroom. Participants shared that because they were African American males the expectations for them to be academically successful was lower than that of their White peers. Participants shared how they felt teachers of color did a more impactful job of making the curriculum meaningful and relevant to them as African-American males. In their responses, they would have wanted the curriculum to be more culturally responsive by having more representation of people of color.</p>
Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Central Research Question</li> <li>▪ Sub-Question 1</li> <li>▪ Sub-Question 3</li> </ul>	<p>Without exception, all participants expressed the relationships they forged with school staff, friends, and family as beneficial to their school experiences. The participants expressed that relationship development with staff of color was easy as they felt that staff of color understood them better than their White counterparts. The friendships developed in school were cited as motivators for positive academic success. Additionally, family relationships were instrumental to academic achievement. More specifically each participant praised the relationship with their mother and spoke about the positive impact their mother had on them academically.</p>

School Related Experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Central Research Question</li> <li>▪ Sub-Question 1</li> <li>▪ Sub-Question 2</li> </ul>	<p>Participants acknowledged that their experiences outside of the classroom impacted their academic achievement. All participants were involved in extra-curricular activities be it sports or after-school programs. They unanimously reported that the activities enhanced their academic experience. Participants acknowledged the negative stereotypes for African American males in society and that they experienced those stereotypes in their schools. Participants felt due to those stereotypes African American males received disproportionate consequences in comparison to White peers in school. Participants also shared a school whose demographic was predominately students of color. Participants revealed that receiving awards and recognition was a motivating factor in their academic achievement.</p>
Non-School Related Experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Central Research Question</li> <li>▪ Sub-Question 1</li> <li>▪ Sub-Question 3</li> </ul>	<p>Participants' academic achievement was not only impacted in the school building but outside of school as well. Most participants experienced some form of tragedy while in school. There were a few participants who experienced the death of classmates while in school. Participants shared that the community in which a person lives can either impact them positively or negatively. They agreed that having a strong will for success is a protective factor in a challenging community. Most participants were in single-parent homes and took advantage of mentorship programs in the community. They attribute positive personal growth and the resolve to avoid negative activities to the connections with mentors. The participants also spoke to the perils of social media and the false sense of reality it projects as it relates to both academic and life success. They report that social media has the ability to make one lose focus on educational importance and goals.</p> <hr/>

### **Central Research Question**

The central research question was, “What are the perceptions and lived academic experiences of African American males, who attended urban high schools, concerning their academic achievement in North Carolina?” Hermeneutic phenomenology, according to Neubauer et al. (2019), examines the experiences that people have in their daily lives and their life worlds. The participants in this study viewed their experiences of their academic achievement through the viewpoint of their interactions with school staff, the delivery of the curriculum, relationships formed, and other school- and non-school-related variables. Understanding the students’ lived experiences is also important. Students’ lived experiences are essential because learning is influenced by one’s surroundings and daily interactions with people, practices, and objects (Hagenah & Thompson, 2021). There was a consensus among participants that the school experiences of African American males are not identical, but that the factors surrounding them are similar. The underlying factor of these experiences is that society and academia treat them differently simply for being African-American males.

Kevin, shared in the focus group, “that despite my intelligence, I had to put in twice as much effort as my White peers”. Shamar added that “as a Black male most people only believe we know how to play sports, although we may like sports, we are more than just athletes.” The participants valued the experiences in school, be they positive or negative, and continued to draw on those experiences daily.

### **Sub-Question One**

Sub-question one asked, “What are the participants’ perceptions of the factors that contributed to their academic achievement?” In fully understanding this sub-question, it is necessary to examine it through the themes of academics, relationships, as well as school and

non-school-related variables. Many students have varying academic successes throughout school, such outcomes as achievement and performance are best predicted by variables measured in education (Guay & Bureau, 2018). Duane compared the factors contributing to his academic achievement to that of making a cake. He said:

... the ingredients to making a cake are found in different places and can be used to do other things, but when combined properly you get a cake. This is similar to factors for academic achievement, the factors can stand alone, but when they all come together you're able to be academically successful.

Michael viewed positive classroom culture as one that encompasses a culturally competent and inclusive curriculum and marked that as a leading factor for academic achievement. He said, "When your teacher created a positive emotional climate and made the lessons culturally relevant and responsive, I was able to achieve more success".

### **Sub-Question Two**

Sub-question two asked, "How do participants feel their race influenced their academic achievement?" Regardless of the age, height, and weight of the participants, the one demographic they share is they are African American males. Merolla and Jackson (2019) asserted that racial disparities in most educational outcomes have remained essentially unchanged since the 1970s. Within the focus group, participants expressed that at the start of their school journey, they expected teachers and staff of the school to understand and respect all students. Bryan shared that this expectation was not what he experienced. "I realized really quick that the skin played a role in the expectations my teachers had for me, I felt like the teacher gave me low expectations because they wanted me to feel good."

Cory felt that although he was recognized and received awards "I think I only got certain

awards because I was Black.” Shaun joined in and said, “I love being Black, I used the low expectations as motivation to show them I can do more.” Participants discussed how they realized they were treated differently, but they used Black history as a motivator. Edward shared “I see it as, our forefathers went through too much for me to use me being Black as an excuse not to do well in school, no matter my situation.”

### **Sub-Question Three**

Sub-question three asked, “How did a parent, guardian, or caregiver influence the participants’ academic performance?” When discussing the impact of family on their academic achievement the subject resonated personally with each participant. Seven of the participants had parents with only high school diplomas. However, the expectations from their families remained high. Those expectations and parental motivation have an impact on their child’s academic achievement (Boonk et al., 2018). Those participants shared that this never stopped their parent(s) from supporting them in school. Charles shared “Man I love my parents, they did not go to college, but I think that made it harder for me because they wanted better for me than they had.” Each participant spoke specifically about the impact of their mother on their academic achievement. Patrick spoke about his mother’s high expectations of his educational success. He said, “Listen, I was not about to let my mother down, she sacrificed too much for me to be playing around in school.” Michael also shared “I saw my mother work three jobs while I was in school and still make time to help me with my homework, if it wasn’t for her I wouldn’t be where I am today.”

### **Summary**

The fourth chapter presented an outline of the concept of academic achievement. With the use of in-depth descriptions of 10 participants’ focus group, semi-structured interviews, and

questionnaires, the chapter explored the lived experiences of African-American males who graduated from urban high schools in North Carolina. The questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and focus group data were analyzed using the choreographic method, which entailed listening to and transcribing the texts from the interviews and focus group, multiple readings of questionnaires, and re-reading the transcripts, coding the data, summarizing the coded data, and interpreting the data through memoing. The data revealed four themes: academic experience, relationships, school-related issues, and non-school-related issues. The curriculum, teachers/staff, friends, family, extracurricular activities, tangibles, intangibles, adverse childhood experiences, community resources, and social media were the sub-themes. This chapter addressed the central research question as well as the three sub-questions.

The 10 African American male high school graduates in an urban school district in North Carolina who were chosen through purposive sampling gave vivid accounts of their academic achievements. The perspectives of the participants on the phenomena of academic achievement were covered in this study using textual and structural descriptions. How the participants felt about the classroom culture that the teachers fostered is one of the most significant factors that affected their academic achievement. This includes the teacher's knowledge of the most effective method for teaching the subject and their ability to make it culturally relevant. The participants also spoke about how African-American male stereotypes in society manifest themselves in the classroom and the school environment. Participants felt they were held to lesser expectations than their White counterparts and that they needed to work twice as hard to be given the same opportunities. Participants highlighted the value of relationships between teachers and students, and that they believed that relationships could be more easily formed with teachers of color.

Lastly, their high school academic achievement was greatly influenced by their relationships with their family and community.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

This chapter elaborates on a hermeneutic phenomenological examination of 10 African American males' perspectives and experiences who graduated from North Carolina's urban high schools. This chapter will give the contextual relationship between the empirical and theoretical literature presented in Chapter 2 and the study findings. It will confirm the findings that the classroom culture fostered by the teacher, relationships, school-related factors, and non-school-related factors all influence the perceived academic achievement beliefs of African-American males. In addition to that, I will discuss the implications that the research has both theoretically and empirically. Next, I discuss the limitations and delimitations of my study and offer recommendations for further study. The chapter will conclude with a summary.

### **Discussion**

This chapter expounds on the hermeneutic phenomenological study of the lived experiences and perceptions of 10 African American males who graduated from urban high schools in North Carolina concerning their academic achievement. This chapter is devoted to presenting the data gathered from the participants and will provide the contextual connection between research findings and the lived experiences of the participants. It will validate the findings that the classroom culture fostered by the teacher, relationships, school-related factors, and non-school-related factors all affect African-American males' perceived beliefs concerning their academic achievement.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

I used van Manen's (2015) methodology for the hermeneutic phenomenological study to acquire data for exploring and interpreting the lived experiences of African American males who



graduated from high school concerning their academic achievement. I also relied on McKown (2013) social equity theory as one of my frameworks. This study used purposive sampling, which entails specified criteria exhibited by the participants before the commencement of the study (Padilla-Díaz, 2015). All 10 participants were African-American males who graduated from an urban high school. The design allowed participants to describe their lived experiences through questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups. Data was collected and analyzed using a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology to identify themes and sub-themes.

### ***Summary of Thematic Findings***

The first theme, academic experience, includes former students' perspectives of how they felt about their classroom academic experience and its influence on their academic achievement. Sub-themes associated with this first significant theme are culture fostered by the teacher in the classroom and how the curriculum is taught. The second theme, relationships, includes sub-themes of teacher, staff, family, and friends. The third theme, school-related experiences, includes extra-curricular activities, intangible, and tangible as sub-themes. The final theme, non-school experiences, is supported by the sub-themes of adverse childhood experience, social media, and community resources related to the theme.

### **Interpretation #1: Understanding Student Cultural Backgrounds Influences**

African American males are not a homogeneous population. According to Marchand et al. (2019), African Americans have a variety of customs, religious convictions, social and economic standings, political allegiances, and philosophies. Therefore, no one method can be used to educate African American students. Likewise, it is fallacious to view the impact of

students' academic experiences through a deficit lens or in terms of their White counterparts' social-cultural capital.

Darby and Rury (2018) assert during integration African Americans were believed to be inferior to Whites in cognitive ability, character, and conduct, though there was disagreement over whether nature or their unfortunate circumstances or culture were responsible (Darby & Rury, 2018). The disagreement about culture influencing African Americans being inferior to Whites is still prevalent in our schools today. Due to the lack of some educators' willingness to gain a better understanding of the culture of their African-American students. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in 2020, African Americans comprised 15% of the national population of more than 49.4 million public school students. Depending on their location, they might or might not have had African-American teachers. The representation of African-American faculty is of importance because interaction with staff members who are of the same race as the students of color has been shown to increase academic achievement. (Neville & Parker, 2017).

Shamar said, "I already know going in that because I am Black if I didn't have a Black or teacher of color, I was going to have to work extra hard in the class because I believe the White teachers didn't understand us." Shamar recalled when he was in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade he had a 4.0 GPA his freshman year, when I walked into his English class his teacher looked at him and said, "Are you sure you are in the right class?" Five other participants shared that they had similar experiences in the honor and advanced placement classes they were in due to the lack of diversity in the classroom. Although they experienced negative interactions with some teachers that was not the case for all of the teachers. It cannot be assumed that all White teachers in predominantly minority schools stigmatize African-American students. Patrick shared that his

favorite teacher was his 11th-grade Science teacher who was White. Patrick said, “he was taking the time to really understand me, and was able to make his lessons meaningful and relevant for me to understand, shoot I had Black teachers that didn’t do that, I’m just saying.”

All participants noted that their academic experiences were enhanced through the expectations or perceived expectations from their teacher. Flanagan et al., (2020) assert teachers’ expectations, or the views they hold about their students’ academic ability, are a major modifiable contributor to students’ academic achievement, and so it stands to reason that there would be a correlation between student academic achievement and teachers’ expectations. This held true throughout the study. When asked in the focus group what do you want teachers to know about African American males, Kevin responded, “They need to know we are not a slow leak, you don’t have to lower the bar for us. We can meet and exceed your expectations if you would give us a chance. Edward then said, “Right, I had this teacher when I was in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade who told me I have high expectations for you, and you will go to college.” He shared how just knowing that made a difference in him. Lastly when talking about expectations Bryan added, “we can tell the expectations no matter if they are low or high, by their actions not just what they say”.

Irrespective of the ethnicity or social origin of the teacher, the participants believe that a classroom culture that fosters high expectations for each student and a teacher’s willingness to create culturally responsive lessons, as well as relevant, positively influences students’ academic achievement. According to Charles, “Although we are all Black males, we all still learn differently, you don’t have to lower the expectations just to make us feel good. Make your lesson relevant for us and we will exceed your expectations.” Shaun concludes with an analogy of dunking a basketball, “If you are training me to jump high, but you lower the goal. Yeah, I am

going to feel good about myself but when the goal is raised higher and I can't dunk it, then how do I feel? Just give us the high expectations first, don't lower them to make us feel good.

### **Interpretation #2: Impact of Interpersonal Interactions**

Academic achievement can be positively or adversely impacted by the relationships students develop with their teachers, staff, families, and friends (Fredericks et al., 2019). When children have the sense that they are supported, they can be themselves without any inhibitions. Individuals you engage with develop a relationship and trust with one another through interpersonal interactions (Khan et al., 2018). "The relationships I made when I was in school still help me today", according to Cory. He added, "It is difficult to be academically successful without building positive relationships with your teachers, staff, and friends." Duane also discussed the contribution of his familial ties to his academic achievements, "I would have fallen through the cracks if my family and I didn't have such a close bond".

Teachers are the most important extrinsic element influencing students' academic experiences (Digamon & Cinches, 2017). Teachers are the cornerstones of students' interpersonal connections from the standpoint of school and education. Shaun discovered that the reason he failed to establish relationships with certain instructors and staff members was because he didn't "think they were sincere even if they tried. I'm simply saying that it seemed unauthentic. Many of the teachers with whom I did build a relationship were teachers of color, specifically my Black teachers; it was as if they understood me better, which made it easier".

A student's academic achievement needs to have the impression that they have a positive relationship with the faculty and staff of their school. In the same way that having positive relationships with teachers can lead to higher academic achievement, having negative

relationships with teachers can lead to lower academic achievement. These kinds of interactions with teachers and staff can make students feel as though they are not respected by the teacher or staff member. According to Michael, “If students don’t feel as though the teacher is willing to help them, then they don’t feel as though they can ask questions, because the response would be negative.” “Teachers want the students to respect them, but they have to give the students the same respect,” says Duane. The inability to ask questions out of fear of a negative reaction, “is like they don’t think you know how to do the work anyway,” he continued.

Negative opinions about a student’s ability or willingness to do assigned work may strain the teacher-student relationship, which is sometimes difficult to repair and impacts the whole school experience (Redding, 2019). On the other side, according to Shaun, a positive relationship with a teacher or member of the staff is one in which they, “believe in your ability to do the work, and when they say they care about you, it is something you can see, hear, and feel.” Students gain a sense of security while attending school because of the relationships they develop with their teachers. According to Patrick, “Knowing I had teachers I had a good relationship with was like having family there, you knew someone there had your back.”

The family plays a crucial part in a student’s academic achievement. The quality of the child-parent relationship is a reliable predictor of academic achievement (Carpenter et al., 2006; Reeves & Howard, 2016). As a result, the student typically adopts the importance that the family places on education and academic achievement. Charles thanked his parents for, “instilling the value of the importance of education in me at a young age.” Not all participants were able to engage in Charles’ discussion about the influence of both of his parents. According to Elliott et al. (2017), the number of African Americans living in homes headed by single mothers is increasing at the same time that more children in the US are growing up without a father. You

can see the effects that this dynamic is having from both angles. “My mom worked a lot, but she still showed up for me when it came to school,” Corey said. Thus, it is feasible for a single-parent home to have the same positive effects as a home with two parents.

However, not all familial relationships are equally supportive. Families with several children may find themselves unable to provide for the needs of each child while expecting them to do well in school. “It was just my mom, me, and my six sisters,” Shamar recalled, “My mom did the best she could, but she couldn’t support all of us equally.” He explained how the lack of support caused him to become more reclusive saying, “It got to the point when I got home from school, I never left out of my room except to eat, but the expectation for me to do well in school remained the same.” Even though all families are not made equal, there is a correlation between the family’s relationships and the student’s academic achievement. Bryan shared, “No matter the relationship with family members, it’s our education, not theirs, at the end of the day we have to get the work done.” Michael, who was homeless before being adopted, believed that “if you have any relationship with your family, you are lucky.”

Peer friendship is important for a student’s academic progress (Fredericks et al., 2019). (Geraci et al., 2017) found that friendships can have a positive effect on student academic achievement because they supplement other interpersonal relationships that present difficulties. A “brotherhood,” in Shaun’s words, exists between him and his friends. He said, “In and out of school, my brothers and I always had each other’s backs.” Patrick added, “Right, knowing you can rely on others makes school much easier as well.” Students frequently form friendships with others who share their academic goals. When Patrick stated, “Man, my friends and I would make getting good grades on tests a competition, everyone wanted to get the highest score and if you didn’t get it this time you worked harder the next time,” he provided support for this.

Charles, on the other hand, said that he had a group of friends who, “didn’t care much about school, so they would skip. I’m not going to lie, I used to leave with them, but I wanted more for myself, so we stopped being friends.” An individual’s academic achievement can be affected, either favorably or unfavorably, by the influence of the friendships they maintain.

### **Interpretation #3 School Experiences**

Many African-American male students are greeted with terms like “criminal,” “aggressive,” “anti-school,” and “hardcore” the moment they walk through the doors of American schools (Ross & Stevenson, 2018). This was not lost on the participants of the study. When asked how being an African American male impacted their time in school, several students pointed to their identity as a defining factor. In Duane’s opinion, African-American males needed to do more than merely attend school. He stated, “It is crucial to get involved in clubs and/or sports because it keeps you focused and out of trouble.” Michael affirmed Duane’s statement, “I used the clubs I was a part of to help me with my schoolwork, I was struggling in Science, so I joined the Science club”.

Charles said that playing sports helped him focus and that the coaching staff encouraged him, “I won’t lie, I probably wouldn’t have done well in school or gone to college if it weren’t for me playing sports.” He acknowledged that his coaches had a significant impact on his life outside of the classroom. He stated, “Coach would always check in on us man, we had to turn in our progress and report cards to him all year, not just during the season.” Bryan agreed with Duane, “Playing a sport definitely kept me out of trouble. I discovered that I was regarded differently from others who did not play sports.” One of the two participants, Corey, did not play a sport or belong to any clubs. He thought that what he had to deal with in school was the same as what he had to deal with outside of school in society in response to the question

regarding the role that being an African American male had in your school experience. “I believed that we would all be treated equally at school and that I would be excluded from what society says about African American males.”

Kevin said, “Man I did too, all the stereotypes for us [African American males] it’s like they come in the school too.” Kevin also discussed the disciplinary procedures he believed were unjust for African-American male students. Reno et al. (2018), who cited evidence showing that students of color and males are consistently overrepresented in detention, suspension, and expulsion, supported this claim. Shaun offered a specific instance of how he and a fellow student (a White male) agreed to skip the second part of a school day. “We both skipped class and left together and did everything, but guess who is the one that got suspended me.” Shaun added, “It’s the same in the streets, where Blacks are always in more trouble for the same behavior.”

African-American males are driven by competition for acceptance and independence among peers and in society (Hinton & Cook, 2021). Each participant acknowledges receiving rewards and recognition, but not all believe they were merited. Edward revealed that he believed he was singled out for special recognition “because he was Black”. He said, “I am appreciative of the awards and recognition, but give it to me because I earned it, not just to try to make me feel good,” Shamar said in response to Edwards’s comments. Bryan, on the other hand, believed that his school had a family atmosphere and that students received awards and recognition based on merit. He said, “At my school, everyone had to work for their prizes; no one ever got one merely to make them feel good or meet a quota.” All participants appreciate the honors and accolades as sources of inspiration throughout their years in school.



#### **Interpretation #4 The Community**

School may be the safest location for some students, but students cannot stay at school all day or on weekends. Therefore, the local community must step up to assist students. The community is one of the factors that may have an adverse or beneficial impact on a student and their family and directly affect the academic achievement of the students (Kam et al., 2018). The area where the school is located as well as the larger community are both parts of the community that have the power to influence a student's future. Shaun revealed, "The location and demographics of a school tell you a lot about it".

Bryan agreed and then proceeded to compare the resources available in each community. He said, "The school will have more resources and be able to purchase more items if there are more White students, but if there are more Black students, you already know the projects or the ghetto". For some children, leaving their current environment must remain a top focus to succeed academically, regardless of where they live or what they see there. Shaun admitted that unless there is a specific cause, he no longer enjoys returning home. He stated, "I despise having to go back home because there is still a lot of drug use and violence." Edward described how, despite several tragedies, he had to stay focused on academics. He said, "It affects you when you see your friends gunned down in the street." He added, "You have to choose whether you want to continue living this life or leave; I wanted to leave so I had to remain in those books." Bryan revealed, "Everything can be overwhelming at times."

The community's influence does not always have a bad connotation. Community support can help students access more resources and provide a safer atmosphere, both of which can help to reduce the dangers connected to poor academic achievement (Epstein, 2018). Michael was appreciative of the help from his neighborhood. Everyone in my neighborhood was interested in

the success of the students. When inquiring about the resources that the neighborhood offered. Participants discussed how college preparedness and mentoring programs had the biggest positive impact on them. Cory claims, “I participated in a mentoring program throughout my time in high school. It was great, I learned a lot, and it kept me off the streets.”

In addition to the importance of the physical community, this generation must also contend with the social media community. Patrick believed that individuals misrepresent themselves on social media. He shared, “Man, people are lying on social media, posing with weapons and cash when they don’t have any,” When asked how social media influences academic performance. Shamar said, “It can go both ways really, If you don’t have control, then you will get lost in believing everything you see is real and you will go after the quick money.” Duane added, “You’re right, especially now, people don’t really care about school, and I know this because they’re not posting how well they’re doing in school.” Schools and the communities where students live must embrace an “it takes a village mindset” if they are to help children reach their full potential and achieve academic success Shaun shared.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of African American males, who attended urban high schools, concerning their academic achievement in North Carolina. Students, teachers, school and district-level administrators, parents, lawmakers, and the broader community may all benefit from this study’s findings in terms of policy and practice. Even though the “separate but equal” policy was ruled unconstitutional decades ago, the academic achievement gap in schools demonstrates how the color line continues to divide us (Nathan, 2021). The results of this study are intended to help stakeholders in urban school districts in North Carolina design, carry out, and maintain

educational initiatives that support academic achievement for all students and close the academic achievement gap between African-American males and their peers. The policy and practice-related implications of this study are covered in this section.

### ***Implications for Policy***

State and municipal governments, through their responsibilities in public education, must take the first steps toward closing the academic performance gap between African-American males and their peers (Bottiani et al., 2017). The possibilities and difficulties of the 21st-century learner must be reflected in the policies developed for North Carolina students at legislative assemblies and school board meetings. These practices must be creative and culturally responsive. Some current policies in North Carolina do not consider students' interests, identities, wants, or ambitions. To optimize academic attainment for all African-American male students in North Carolina, policies regarding school personnel and instructional approaches should be reviewed.

A shift in how North Carolina recruits' educators will help African-American males. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2022) reports that just 14.5% of educators in the state are people of color, while the proportion of White educators is 77%. Students of color benefit from interacting with faculty members who look like them, therefore having a significant number of African Americans on staff is crucial (Neville & Parker, 2017). As a result, school districts need to work with colleges and universities to develop initiatives that will help them attract and retain African-American educators in their classrooms. The teacher's race is merely a contributing factor. The amount of teaching experience held by the teaching staff is another factor.

Each student deserves to have capable teachers; however, North Carolina students frequently receive instruction from inexperienced teachers. It has been shown that minority and low-income children are more likely to be taught by inexperienced or ineffective educators than their White, middle-class counterparts (Bettini, 2021). Policymakers should eliminate the disparity in the placement of experienced instructors in schools with a disproportionate number of White students. While first-year educators inject vitality and enthusiasm into their schools and classrooms, they also confront a steep learning curve. Academic achievement can be profoundly impacted when students attend schools with substantial teacher turnover which typically happens with inexperienced teachers.

Teachers must be innovators and must be able to make the curriculum they are teaching meaningful and relevant to the students (Bottiani et al., 2017, Datnow et al., 2018). Teachers in North Carolina have the opportunity to show their students the relevance of what they are learning in the classroom to real-world situations. Corey talked about how crucial it was for him to have a teacher who could make the lessons he was learning meaningful and applicable to him. “I will never forget we were studying interest rates in class, and I was not interested. However, once the teacher explained to me how to calculate how much a car and house payment was, I was locked in at that point.” Educators in North Carolina must be trained to make curriculum-to-real-world application connections so that students can understand the relevance of what is being taught.

Both public schools and the United States reflect the country’s diverse cultural makeup. African-American males in North Carolina deserve instructors who comprehend their culture and can communicate with them through their cultural sensibilities. Michael said that having culturally responsive instructors made the classes “more engaging and relatable.” The North

Carolina House of Representatives passed House Bill 324 in March 2023, prohibiting bans public school teachers from compelling students to believe they should feel guilty or responsible for past actions committed by people of the same race or sex. Even though the measure was approved, educators need to be aware that discussing the history of race and acknowledging a student's culture are not synonymous. According to Bingham and Okagaki (2012), students have a negative effect as a result of the fact that they do not see themselves or their cultures represented in what they are taught. Regardless of color, school systems should offer culturally responsive training to all teachers.

### ***Implications for Practice***

The information gathered and evaluated for this hermeneutic phenomenological study has practical implications. All stakeholders involved—administrators, teachers, parents, and the community should consider the implications discussed here. When new policies are adopted, it often takes some time before they can be put into effect with fidelity. It may take longer for legislative changes to influence the academic achievement of African American males in North Carolina than it would for stakeholders to make improvements to their present educational procedures and processes. Educators in North Carolina have an opportunity to cultivate a more welcoming and caring atmosphere in their schools for African American males.

In education, the adage “You have to Maslow before you Bloom” is frequently used. This proverb emphasizes the value of teachers taking the time to get to know their students on a personal level before attempting to impart knowledge. The building of meaningful relationships with students to the point where students are willing to relate the difficulties they are experiencing and how school officials may assist them in achieving academic success comes from showing the students you care (Dameron et al., 2019). The academic achievement of

students in North Carolina schools can be improved by creating an environment of optimism and fostering meaningful relationships between teachers and students (Williams et al., 2019).

Cultivating a welcoming and caring atmosphere in schools is crucial to the basic needs of a student. African American males will continue to identify labels like “criminal,” “aggressive,” “anti-school,” and “hardcore” with themselves unless schools create a culture that is welcoming and caring (Ross & Stevenson, 2018). Relationship-building time should be prioritized by teachers. Teachers can schedule a small amount of time throughout each class session for students to ask questions, share brief stories about their lives, and just check-in. When this is done, it will result in a degree of trust being established between the teacher and the student.

Another adage goes: “It’s simple to jump over a bar that’s been set low”. The saying refers to the expectations that teachers have for their students. The expectations, or the views teachers hold about their students’ academic ability, are a major modifiable contributor to students’ academic achievement, and so it stands to reason that there would be a correlation between student academic achievement and teachers’ expectations (Flanagan et al., 2020). When cultivating a welcoming and caring atmosphere, expectations of the students must be raised. It is unfair to have a low standard of expectation for one group of students while having a high standard of expectation for another group of students. Teachers must be careful not to shape expectations based on a student’s ethnicity or socioeconomic status (Johnston et al., 2019). This deficit viewpoint can lead to low expectations and in turn can impact the quality and effectiveness of the teacher (Kennedy & Soutullo, 2017). African American men should not be treated differently or have lower expectations placed on them because of their race.

## **Theoretical Implications**

The results of this study have theoretical implications for district administrators, school administrators, teachers, parents, guardians, caregivers, and policymakers. The theoretical implications also corroborate findings that African American males can be successful in school to close the academic achievement gap. The theoretical significance of this study examined McKown's (2013) social equity theory. Through questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups, participants were able to share their perceptions and experiences regarding their academic achievement in public high school. The participants were asked open-ended questions designed to extract rich, descriptive accounts of their experiences in school and how those accounts affected their academic performance.

McKown (2013) social equity theory describes how four propositions address the academic achievement gap. The first proposition is that a direct influence supports achievement, but a signal influence tends to convey negative expectations for an individual's racial-ethnic group. The second proposition is that by the time a child is in their elementary years of schooling, they are better able to understand the stereotyped expectations and cues of that expectation (McKown, 2013). The third and fourth propositions are that there is a small range of developmentally variable environments that influence the academic achievement gap.

Participants understood the role their race played in their ability to their academic achievement. Several participants perceived the negative expectations of African American males projected on them as a barrier to their academic achievement. Which confirms educational systems are not immune to social inequities. Other participants, perceptions of the school support and discipline practices were considered both as benefits and challenges to their academic achievement.

## **Empirical Implications**

Racial differences are a problem that experts have been trying to fix for the past 50-60 years, starting with school integration (Bottiani et al., 2017). During integration, African Americans were believed to be inferior to Whites in cognitive ability, character, and conduct, though there was disagreement over whether nature or their unfortunate circumstances and culture were responsible (Darby & Rury, 2018). Data collected from this research study suggest African-American males still feel as though they are viewed as inferior to their White peers. Participants shared how they understood the role their race played in their academic achievement. Teachers' expectations, or the views they hold about their students' academic ability, are a major modifiable contributor to students' academic achievement, and so it stands to reason that there would be a correlation between student academic achievement and teachers' expectations (Flanagan et al., 2020).

The findings of this study show perceived negative expectations of African American males projected on them create a barrier to their academic achievement. Which confirms educational systems are not immune to social inequities. The representation of African-American faculty is of importance because interaction with staff members who are of the same race as the students of color has been shown to increase academic achievement (Neville & Parker, 2017). The findings of this study indicate that cultural competence is important when building relationships with African-American males. Participants were able to create more positive relationships when they had educators who identified with them culturally, which assisted in their academic success. Teachers, according to Civitillo et al., (2019), prefer to emphasize cultural commonalities and minority groups' assimilation into mainstream culture, such strategies for addressing cultural diversity in the classroom fall short of fostering equity and preserving



cultural difference. This study identified the role of the family as a contributing factor to African-American male's academic success. Participants shared that their family motivated them to be successful academically. According to studies, many parents, guardians, and caregivers are conscious of their role as co-educators and share equal responsibility for their children's future success (Matteucci & Helker, 2018).

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

A contextual framework for the limitations and delimitations of the terminologies is provided here so that the constraints of this study may be better understood. Ross and Bibler (2019) assert that study limitations represent flaws in a research design that may affect the outcomes and conclusions of the research. Limitations were described by Price and Muran (2004) as features innate to the study technique or design that alter the significance and interpretation of the research findings. According to Ross and Bibler (2009), limitations are aspects of a study or its interpretation that are not directly under the control of the researcher. Akanle et al. (2020) emphasized that bringing attention to challenges encountered in the study was not meant to diminish the significance of the study's fundamental research strategy. Essentially, limitations serve to confirm the reliability as well as the external and internal validity of a study.

Akanle et al. (2020) explained that the delimitation of a study entails both pre- and post-study decisions by the researcher. Some examples of such judgments include theoretical stance(s), study population/participant characteristics, and research questions. Akanle et al. (2020) assert that these types of boundaries are those over which the researcher has the most say

### **Limitations**

This research study has several limitations: sample size, sampling strategy, data collection, and data analysis. The sampling size of this hermeneutic phenomenological study on the perceptions and lived experiences of African American males, who formerly attended urban high schools, concerning their academic achievement in North Carolina included 10 participants. Multiple attempts were made to recruit 12–15 individuals if any of the required 10 participants were unable to finish the research study, I would still have enough people to meet Liberty University's requirements.

Attending Sunday services and setting up a booth in the church lobby are two examples of recruiting methods described in Chapter 3. In addition to discussing the study and possible participation with the Young Adult Ministry. Despite extensive recruitment and commitments from more than the minimum required number of participants, just 10 people took part in the study. However, the sample size was adequate for thematic saturation and the study's breadth. In addition to size and generalizability, the study would be enriched by the age diversity of the participants and the geographical location of the schools attended.

The chosen sampling method also posed some limitations. According to Andrade (2020), the term "purposeful sampling" refers to the process of selecting a participant based on that person's characteristics. The researcher's own bias and the question of whether or not theoretical generalization may be reached both arise when using purposeful sampling. Purposive sampling was the most suitable method of sampling. However, none of these possible issues distorted the research's findings or led to incorrect interpretations.

This research utilized three data collection methods, as described in Chapter 3: a questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group. Participants' beliefs and perspectives were gathered through the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and focus

group. It should be highlighted that the data collection proved to be challenging as it was influenced by the participants' time restrictions, job responsibilities, and other commitments. As a consequence, the questionnaire was done electronically and the semi-structured interviews along with the focus group was conducted virtually at participant-friendly locations. This method, however, did not create limitations to the validity and reliability of the study (Akanle et al., 2020).

Data analysis methodology can be considered a limitation (Theofanidis and Fountouki, 2019). This hermeneutic phenomenological research was conducted using van Manen's method of analysis. As the researcher, I was aware that the biases I hold, experiences, and preconceived ideas could never be fully bracketed out. Therefore, I used *epoche* during the research to concentrate on the participants' experiences. Consequently, the method and objective were devised to acquire and interpret data regarding these experiences. This single focus on the lived experiences of African-American males excluded the perspectives of teachers, families, schools, and district administrators. As a result, I could only draw judgments about the study's effectiveness based on their responses. Validation of the study's results could be accomplished through replication.

### **Delimitations**

This study had three conscious delimitations to ensure relevance and manageability (Coker, 2022). These delimitations included the research design, theoretical frameworks, characteristics, and selection of the participants. From the five types of qualitative research outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018), I chose to focus on phenomenology. This design was better suited to the study's objective of exploring and interpreting the significance of former students' lived experiences in North Carolina. According to Alase (2017), the phenomenological

design method welcomes the researcher's subjectivity while allowing for a description and interpretation of participants' lived experiences.

This phenomenological study uses McKown's social equity theory as its theoretical framework. The deliberate selection of this theoretical framework allowed for the most fruitful investigation of the former students' perspectives on their academic experience. Another delimitation placed on this research was the selection of participants. The selection criteria for the study was developed in response to the dearth of research on the academic achievement of African-American males who graduated from high school in North Carolina. Koppie (2017) suggested that academic achievement leads to students being able to graduate; however, in America, African-American male students graduate at a considerably lower rate than White students and perform lower. Thus, the participants selected were required to meet specific criteria, the primary one being that they be an African-American male who graduated from a selected urban school community within the last ten years. This population excluded ethnic variations and students who graduated longer than ten years ago. Also excluded from the study were former African-American male graduates from rural school districts. The exclusivity of these former students and purposeful sampling narrowed the focus of the study to a particular demographic. Gill (2020) suggests that 10 participants are adequate for a phenomenological study. Therefore, the study's sample size was calculated intentionally and this study used 10 participants.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

As I pursued a research topic that would cover a gap in the literature, it became apparent that there was a dearth of unbiased research on the academic achievement of African-American males from urban school districts. Thus, the purpose of the research was to explore the lived

experiences of African-American males concerning their academic achievement. The results of this study demonstrated the need for more studies on numerous aspects of the lived experiences of African American males concerning academic achievement.

One of the participants broached an issue that needs further investigation: the trauma and tragedy that African American males encounter as part of their lived experiences concerning their academic achievement. Participants discussed the many kinds of traumatic and tragic events that they experienced. Public schools use a variety of strategies to address traumas and tragedies, but staff members are often unsure about the effectiveness of these interventions (Alexander, 2021). Many participants reported that they felt they had no one to talk to when experiencing stress or disaster. Charles recounted that friend was murdered in their neighborhood one morning before school. He attended classes despite a pervasive sense of isolation. Charles concluded with "I wish the school had something that they could have provided me with, maybe some helpful strategies. Because of this, I put in a lot of effort in school so that I wouldn't end up like my friend did. "

Future research should be carried out to investigate the influence that awards and recognitions have on African American males' academic experience. Eight of the participants expressed the importance of recognition and awards for academic achievement. They were inspired either by witnessing a fellow member of their demographic group receive an award or by their success and recognition. Corey's perspective was that witnessing the success of others encourages him because he "realizes that, if they can do it; I can do it too, regardless of where I come from." This topic could contribute to the existing literature on the academic achievement of African American males.

My final recommendation is to carry out a research study analogous to this one with African American males who did not complete high school. The academic experience of this group may be crucial to understanding the policies, supports, and practices that led to the abandonment of their high school education. In conclusion, even though the participants in this research study are of the same race, I believe that another study should be conducted that is analogous with the focus being the academic experiences of African American females. Their academic experiences may be similar but not identical.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of African American males, who attended urban high schools, concerning their academic achievement in North Carolina. As stated in the literature review section of this study, the educational system must comprehend how to close the academic achievement gap to guarantee equal opportunities and access to quality education for all students regardless of race. The central research question addresses the general perceptions of the lived experiences of the participants, while the research sub-questions elicits specificity of participants lived experiences. The ten African Americans who had previously graduated from public high schools in the same urban school district were identified and recruited via purposive sampling. The theoretical framework of this study was based on McKown's (2013) social equity theory. To ensure I developed a comprehensive understanding around the phenomena; the data collected was collected by using qualitative questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and focus group. Analysis of the data collected followed van Manen's (2015) hermeneutic phenomenology qualitative data analysis approach. The data analysis produced four overarching themes: academics; relationships; school experiences; and extracurricular activities. By comparing data

from three different sources, we were able to get new insight into the phenomenon. This research will add to the existing body of knowledge on the value of contextualizing the challenges faced by African-American males in urban school districts concerning their academic achievement.

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**Appendix A: IRB LETTER****LIBERTY UNIVERSITY**  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

May 1, 2023

Jermaine Porter  
Tamika Hibbert

Re: IRB Approval - IRB-FY22-23-1219 AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES, WHO ATTENDED URBAN HIGH SCHOOLS, CONCERNING THEIR ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN NORTH CAROLINA: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Dear Jermaine Porter, Tamika Hibbert,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB). This approval is extended to you for one year from the following date: May 1, 2023. If you need to make changes to the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit a modification to the IRB. Modifications can be completed through your Cayuse IRB account.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

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

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

**G. Michele Baker, PhD, CIP**  
*Administrative Chair*  
**Research Ethics Office**

## **Appendix B: RECRUITMENT LETTER**

Hello Potential Participant,

As a doctoral student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of African American males, who formerly attended urban high schools, concerning their academic achievement in North Carolina, and if you meet my participant criteria and are interested, I would like to invite you to join my study.

Participants must be 18 years of age or older, self-identify as an African American male, have been formerly enrolled in an urban high school in North Carolina for at least two academic years prior to leaving or graduating school, must have graduated less than ten years ago, and must have graduated with a minimum unweighted grade point average of 3.0. Participants, if willing, will be asked to complete a 45-minute questionnaire, participate in a 60-minute interview, review their interview transcripts for about 15 minutes, and participate in a 90-minute focus group. It should take approximately three hours and thirty minutes to complete the procedures listed. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

Would you like to participate? If so, great, could I get your email address so I can send you the link to the questionnaire? Can we set up a time for an interview and focus group. If not, I understand. Thank you for your time.

A consent document will be given to you now. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to electronically prior to completing the questionnaire.

Thank you for your time. Do you have any questions?

Sincerely,

Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

## **Appendix C: PARTICIPANT INFORM CONSENT FORM**

**Title of the Project:** African American Males, Who Attended Urban High Schools, Concerning Their Academic Achievement In North Carolina: A Phenomenological Study

**Principal Investigator:** Jermaine Porter, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, Liberty University

### **Invitation to be Part of a Research Study**

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate you must self-identify as an African American male, be 18 years of age or older, have been formerly enrolled in an urban high school in North Carolina for at least two academic years prior to leaving or graduating school, have graduated less than ten years ago, and have graduated with a minimum unweighted grade point average of 3.0. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

### **What is the study about and why is it being done?**

The purpose of the study is to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of African American males, who attended urban high schools, concerning their academic achievement in North Carolina.

### **What will happen if you take part in this study?**

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Complete a 45-minute, electronic questionnaire. You will be emailed the link to the questionnaire.
2. Participate in a virtual or in-person, audio- and video-recorded interview that will take no more than 1 hour.
3. Review your interview transcript for accuracy, which will take 15 minutes.
4. Participate in a virtual or in-person, audio- and video-recorded focus group that will take no more than 1.5 hours.

### **How could you or others benefit from this study?**

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. By sharing the lived experiences of African American males and their perceptions of their own academic achievement, society will benefit and be able to recognize the different variables that influence African American male academic achievement which may decrease the academic achievement gap.

### **What risks might you experience from being in this study?**

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

I am a mandatory reporter. During this study, if I receive information about child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others, I will be required to report it to the appropriate authorities.

#### **How will personal information be protected?**

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher and their doctoral committee will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.
- Digital data will be stored on a password-locked computer and physical data will be locked in a file cabinet. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted and all physical records will be shredded.
- Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer until participants have reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of the transcripts and then deleted. The researcher and members of his doctoral committee will have access to these transcripts.

#### **Is study participation voluntary?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

#### **What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?**

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

#### **Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?**

The researcher conducting this study is Jermaine Porter. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Tamika Hibbert, at [REDACTED].

#### **Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

*Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.*

### **Your Consent**

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

*I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.*

The researcher has my permission to audio- and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

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Printed Subject Name

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**Appendix D: QUESTIONNAIRE QUESTIONS**

1. Which high school(s) did you attend? Demographic
2. What years did you attend high school? Demographic
3. Age? Demographic
4. Describe, if any, the role your racial identity had on your daily interactions with teachers or other educators during your high school experience.
5. Describe, if any, events or occurrences during your high school experiences that occurred in your community that impacted your academic performance?
6. Depict, if any, events or occurrences directed toward you or other students during your high school experience that motivated you academically.
7. Based on your experiences in a high school, evaluate whether you or any other African American males experienced higher levels of conflict with their teachers because of the lack of relationship between the two.
8. Based on your experiences, what do you think are the most influential factors affecting the African American male population during your high school years in North Carolina?

**Appendix E: INDIVIUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. Please introduce yourself to me, as if we just met one another.
2. Where did you attend high school?
3. What year did you graduate?
4. How do you see yourself today, in terms of being an African American male?
5. Describe any significant experiences in your life that have impacted you academically, and what made them significant?
6. What impact has your family had on you academically?
7. Who has had the largest impact in your life academically?
8. What if anything would you change about yourself if you could?
9. What role has being an African American male had on your academic achievement?
10. Research and data show in North Carolina public schools the academic achievement gap is 27%. Why do you believe that African American males in High School are performing below their peers academically?
11. What opportunities were provided to you that assisted with your academic achievement?

**Appendix F: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. What are some things educators need to know about African American male students?
2. What were the contributing factors to your success in school?
3. What role do you think being an African American male played in your education?
4. From your experiences, what motivates African American males to perform well academically?
5. How has being academically successful benefited you?