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# The Black Male's Perception of Academic Success in the Black Belt Region

Lisa M. Morenzoni  
mathnerd2005@gmail.com

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The Black Male's Perceptions of Academic Success  
in the Black Belt Region

by  
Lisa M. Morenzoni

An Applied Dissertation Submitted to the  
Abraham S. Fischler College of Education  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

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## Approval Page

This applied dissertation was submitted by Lisa M. Morenzoni under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Nova Southeastern University.

Roz Doctorow, EdD  
Committee Chair

Sandra Trotman, PhD  
Committee Member

Kimberly Durham, PsyD  
Interim Dean

## Statement of Original Work

I declare the following:

I have read the Code of Student Conduct and Academic Responsibility as described in the *Student Handbook* of Nova Southeastern University. This applied dissertation represents my original work, except where I have acknowledged the ideas, words, or material of other authors.

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Lisa M. Morenzoni

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Name

August 1, 2017

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Date

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## Abstract

The Black Male's Perceptions of Academic Success in the Black Belt Region. Lisa M. Morenzoni, 2017: Applied Dissertation, Nova Southeastern University, Abraham S. Fischler College of Education. Keywords: phenomenology, academic success, Black males, poverty

The purpose of this applied dissertation was to explore the perceptions of academic success of Black males in the Black Belt in an effort for educators and community members to better understand and meet the needs of young Black men.

In this study, the researcher conducted one 60-minute interview followed by one confirming interview with nine former students (Appendix D) who graduated from the local area high school. Interview questions (Appendix B) were developed by the researcher based on the research questions in the study. These use of these questions assisted in understanding the perceptions of academic success of these young Black men.

From an analysis of the data gathered from the young men's interviews, three prevalent themes emerged: 1) the meaning of academic success, 2) the role of the stakeholders, and 3) a boy's only club. This study will allow educators and community members to examine the highlighted issues and to consider appropriate actions to meet the needs of young Black men.

## Table of Contents

	Page
Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
Definitions of Terms .....	7
Purpose of the Study .....	8
Chapter 2: Literature Review .....	9
Theoretical Framework .....	9
Hope, Hopelessness, and Poverty .....	11
The Boy Crisis .....	13
The Achievement Gap .....	15
Teacher and Student Relationships .....	20
Gang Activity and Involvement .....	24
Incarceration of the Black Male .....	26
The Impact of Social Media, Rap Music, and the Street Code .....	28
Parental Involvement .....	30
The Black Male's Pathway to Success .....	33
Qualitative Phenomenological Study .....	35
Research Questions .....	36
Chapter 3: Methodology .....	38
Aim of the Study .....	38
Qualitative Research Approach .....	38
Participants .....	39
Data Collection Tools .....	40
Procedures .....	41
Data Analysis .....	42
Ethical Considerations .....	44
Trustworthiness .....	45
Potential Research Bias .....	46
Chapter 4: Findings .....	49
Participant's Backgrounds .....	49
Findings .....	57
Summary .....	61
Chapter 5: Discussion .....	62
Introduction .....	62
Discussion of Research Findings .....	63
Limitations .....	67
Conclusions and Recommendations .....	67
References .....	69

## Appendices

A	Recruitment Statement for Research Participation .....	77
B	Semi-Structured Interview Questions .....	79
C	Interview Demographic Descriptors.....	82



## Chapter 1: Introduction

Alabama's Black Belt Region is named for the region's historical agricultural heritage and rich black top soil. The Black Belt Region consists of six counties in Alabama, which flourished for hundreds of years. The cotton industry was supported by the rich soil which brought money, power, slaves, and, eventually, poor black sharecroppers to the area. The region's commerce created some of the wealthiest and most powerful political regions in the United States. Alabama cities such as Montgomery, Selma, and Demopolis were once recognized as some of the most affluent towns in the nation (Edmundite Missions, 2015).

In 1910, the region's decline into poverty began when the boll weevil infestation basically destroyed Alabama's cotton industry. This devastation led to an even deeper level of poverty which was heightened by violent and institutionalized racism and discrimination. Just when the local people thought it could not get any worse, Craig Air Force Base made an announcement in 1978 that it would be closing. The base served as a cornerstone employer. Its closing created a ripple effect throughout the region which led to numerous businesses, retailers, restaurants, and professional businesses closing (Edmundite Missions, 2015).

The region never recovered which caused the Black Belt Region to experience some of the worst poverty problems, such as high crime and no new industry. These type of issues have created ongoing generational and situational poverty to the point that living in the area is compared to living in a third world country. Most of the citizens live in shotgun style houses with large holes in the roofs and floors. Doors and windows of

homes are covered by plastic and paper. Some people live in the streets with no protection from the weather (Edmundite Missions, 2015).

The area has had a very diverse history because the city served as a key location during the Civil Rights Movement of 1965. Black people owned businesses and even held administrative offices such as postmaster. Desegregation appeared to be a thing of the past and many White people hoped the shameful bloody attack on the Edmund Pettus Bridge was history (Martin, 2015).

In spite of these hopeful changes, the school district has been reshaped through protests and become segregated once again. Prior to 1991, the school board was appointed by the city council. In spite of desegregation, there had never been a majority Black city council nor a majority Black school board appointed to govern the school system. In 1987, the city school system hired its first Black Superintendent with a three year contract. The Superintendent had a vision to level the educational playing field for all students, but inherited a plan that was anything but level. In 1990, the superintendent challenged the system and exposed a rigid tracking system for which no formal school policy had been written. This tracking system assured White parents that their children received preferential treatment and placement in the best classes with the best teachers while the Black and poor White children were placed in the low-level classes receiving a second-rate education. Black teachers were not given the opportunity to teach Advanced Placement classes. Many parents were not aware that their children were in lower level classes and what it could mean for their children's education and future. Due to this discovery and exposure, the School Board immediately fired the superintendent which prompted a series of protests because the majority of the parents with school-aged

children supported him and did not want him fired. Eventually, the White parents withdrew their children from the city schools and transferred them to the local county school system or local private schools (Matthews, 1991).

In the meantime, the Black people and their supporters had sit-ins and students boycotted school until eventually all 11 city schools were closed down. The governor sent 200 National Guard troops to keep order. It was like history repeating itself 25 years earlier (Matthews, 1991; Martin, 2015). After the protests, the superintendent's job was reinstated, but his contract was not renewed at the end of the school year (Martin, 2015).

The nation's report card reached crisis levels in 2009. Only 70% of America's first-year high school students were graduating and an estimated 1.2 million students were dropping out each year (Thompson, 2011). In the Black Belt Region, the overall population in poverty is 30.65% with 46.65% of children under the age of 18 in poverty. Only two-thirds of the children are expected to graduate from high school and approximately 70% of them come from single-parent homes (Edmundite Missions, 2015).

**Statement of the problem.** Graduating from high school affects how a person contributes to society. When outside factors such as poverty, gang activity, gun violence, and incarceration affect daily life, it is a challenge for schools to help students to be successful.

The problem of this study was that Black male students in the writer's school had a very low graduation rate which hindered their ability to be successful later in life. There are few documented studies on hope and academic achievement of Black males who graduate high school and continue their educational studies or enter the workforce in

spite of the daily adversity of hopelessness and poverty they face while in high school. It is important to learn what motivates some Black males to succeed in the midst of bad conditions and negative experiences since Black males continue to be underachievers in the academic arena.

**Phenomenon of interest.** Many young Black adolescent male underachieve and devalue school and academics. School has been rejected as a place to develop a sense of identity and self-worth (Kunjufu, 2005). However, some young Black adolescent males find hope and academic success by graduating high school and furthering their education or entering the workforce in spite of the adversity of hopelessness and poverty that they faced every day while in high school.

**Background and justification.** Impoverished Black youth have been the focus of many studies across academic discipline (See, 2007). The number of young Black adolescent males in the Black Belt Region achieving hope and success by graduating high school and going to college or entering the workforce is low. There is a need to reshape the definition of hope and hopelessness as defined by Black adolescent males. Young Black adolescent males need to possess the feelings of hope and success despite their surroundings (Davis-Maye & Perry, 2007).

The Boy Crisis is defined as Black boys who are slipping through the cracks. Black males are feeling alienated by a dominance of female values due to living in single-parent homes where only the mother is present. These boys need to be proud of their masculinity (Kunjufu, 2005). Girls often have higher educational goals than boys. Black boys are the subject of disproportionality by being labeled with a learning

disability and placed in special education. Boys often have to repeat a grade which can lead to them dropping out (Foster, 2011).

There has been a myriad of programs and initiatives to reverse the scholastic underachievement epidemic since academics appear to be rejected by Black adolescent males and eliminate the perceived outlook of hopelessness among them. While these programs have sustained some, there is still a wide achievement gap for these young males. Therefore, something needs to be done to effectively close the gap and reverse the views that these males have of themselves as scholars (Whiting, 2006).

The portrayal of young Black males in the areas of education, labor, and justice has been largely negative. Black males remain at the bottom end of high school graduation rates. The estimated national 2012-13 graduation rate of Black males was 57%. In Alabama, the graduation rate was 57% which is 15% below White males who had a 72% graduation rate. Most states have failed to come up with a uniform way to track graduation rates and making the information publicly known even though this is important data. For some states, it is easier to track Black males who are incarcerated than Black males who have graduated high school in any given year (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015).

Suspension and expulsions reduce the amount of instructional time a student has which further impacts academic achievement. Students who are suspended or expelled have fewer social bonds at school causing them to feel like they do not belong at school which leads to an increase in the dropout rate. The national average suspension rate for Black males is 15%, which is 8% more than Latino males and 10% more than White males. The suspension rate in Alabama for 2012-2013 was 18.9% which was 12.6% more

than White males and 13.2% more than Latino males (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015).

**Deficiencies in the evidence.** Most research on Black achievement has actually been on Black underachievement. See (2007) noted that impoverished Black youth have been the focus of many studies across academic disciplines. Carter (2008) conducted a study on students' beliefs and attitudes about race, student achievement, and the value of school for upward mobility. His findings stated that students' dreams of going to college are not always realized because they are not prepared for college with the proper academic and social skills they need. Students need to have some type of consciousness that helps them to position their goals and dreams in a society that is not always equal. This consciousness should help them ignite academic motivation and perseverance so they do not see themselves as victims in an unjust society (Carter, 2008). Kafele (2009) noted that too many young Black male teenagers feel that they will not live to see beyond the age of 21. They feel that it is useless to spend their time and energy achieving and accomplishing any goals because they will never live long enough to see them fulfilled (Kafele, 2009).

There is more research conducted on Black female students than on Black male students. Kunjufu (2005) stated that there is already a Black male shortage because the infant mortality rate on Black boys is higher than Black girls. He stated that boys should not be compared to girls, thus making an assumption that boys are deficient. These same differences are not allowed in the home either. Growth and development are being defined from a female perspective which is disadvantageous in male growth and

development (Kunjufu, 2005). Harper and Wood (2016) also stated that the number of Black males is decreasing as a result of being victims of homicide or committing suicide.

**Audience.** The primary audience for this study includes teachers and administrators of Black adolescent males in the Black Belt Region. However, the findings may be used for anyone who works with young Black adolescent males who may feel unsuccessful in an academic setting.

### **Definition of Terms**

Before discussing the study in-depth, it is important to provide an overview of the frequent terms used throughout the various chapters.

**Achievement gap.** The differences between the test scores of minority and the test scores of their White and Asian peers (NEA, 2016).

**At-risk students.** Students identified as at-risk of failing academically or who have behavioral, social, and/or emotional deficits that negatively affect their ability to function successfully at school (Kunjufu, 2005).

**Competency.** The idea that a student is equipped and feels empowered to be successful while in school.

**Grit.** A combination of tenacity and perseverance-a willingness to take risks even if it means sometimes failing and starting again (Hoerr, 2013).

**Poverty.** A set of money income thresholds varied by family size and composition. If a family's total income is less than the family's threshold, then the family and every member of the household is considered to be living in poverty (United States Census Bureau, 2016).

**Resiliency.** The ability to form a successful adaptation in the face of obstacles and adversity. How people cope with stressors; how people make sense of negative experiences and events (DESTA, 2011).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to use qualitative phenomenological research methods to explore and discover factors that influence student achievement experienced by young Black adolescent males who graduated from the only high school located in an impoverished community of the Black Belt Region of Alabama which was affected by at-risk descriptors such as, violence, gang activity, incarceration, single-parent homes, drop-outs, etc. A qualitative study allowed the researcher to explore and describe how these young Black adolescent males felt about their lives and discuss it in their own words and contexts in which they are both familiar and comfortable. Using individual student interviews, conversations, focus meetings, and an analysis of personal texts, this study explored emerging constructs from the view point of the research participants. This study will increase awareness and broaden the understanding of how our impoverished young Black adolescent males conceptualize and experience feelings of hope and success in the face of adversity, fear, and hopelessness. It provides critical factors that contribute to the development of how other young Black adolescent males can be helped to experience the same success.

This study was conducted in the Black Belt Region of Alabama. Participants were Black males who have graduated from a local high school and who are currently enrolled in a post-secondary institution, serving in the military, or employed in the workforce.



## Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter provides a review of the literature. It includes a description of the theoretical framework which guided the study. The first discussion is how hope, hopelessness, and poverty affect the Black male student which leads to the boy crisis and an increase in the achievement gap. Teacher and student relationships and how it affects the educational process are discussed. Gang activity and incarceration will be discussed next. The impact of social media, rap music, and the street code will be reviewed. In addition, there is a discussion of parental involvement and how it influences students. Lastly, there is a look at the Black male's success and how families, schools, and communities can help and provide support to help the Black male be successful.

### Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by grit and resiliency theories. It includes an Afrocentric perspective which allows an understanding of the experiences of the participants within their cultural contexts. A brief discussion of each framework follows. Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly (2007) defined grit as the perseverance and passion for achieving long-term goals. McCarty (2014) stated grit as continued determination long after the excitement of a new plan is gone. Grit entails working strenuously toward overcoming challenges while maintaining effort and interest over time despite the occasional failure, adversity, or plateau encountered along the way (Duckworth, et al, 2007).

Perseverance allows people to maintain action even when they feel like quitting. If time and effort are defined, grit can help them accomplish the impossible. Many failures come down to not executing plans of action which is necessary to accomplish a

goal. Success is not just an aspect of developed talent or strengths, but the ability to move forward and take action. Continuous motivation to perform well is critical to long-term success (McCarty, 2014).

While practice is not always fun and success is not always easy, the will to press on is necessary. Those who display grit display real commitment to rise above circumstances that would otherwise make it easier to just give up and quit. These commitments and actions to accomplish a goal drive and sustain effort when challenges make it difficult to reach a goal. Being able to retain a level of commitment comes from the strong belief in the value of the outcome along with being able to have self-discipline in order to keep and honor the commitment (McCarty, 2014).

People face many stressors in their lives. Resilience is described as an outcome and a set of qualities or processes that enable a person to make use of both external and internal resources (Mitchell, n.d.). Hooper (2009) described resiliency as a conceptual framework which emphasized the strengths rather than deficits among people who experienced various degrees of adversity, trauma, and stress. Coyle (2011) stated that resiliency is the ability to bounce back. Risk and protective factors are examined. These factors occur at the individual, family, or community level and may be situational or ongoing. Risk factors include, but not are limited to, stress, poverty, alcoholism, and mental illness (Hooper, 2009; Coyle, 2011). Resiliency at an individual level is viewed in the context of a dysfunctional family (Hooper, 2009). Individual resilience is sometimes interdependent with family resiliency because family goals such as achieving family members' emotional needs, children's growth towards becoming productive adults, and

promoting mutual support between adults and aging parents are aligned with individual growth (Coyle, 2011).

An Afrocentric perspective utilized by Asante (1990) is a phenomena viewed from people of African descent. Afrocentricity is a set of principles that accounts for the understanding which address the life and experience of people of African descent in America, on the African continent, and in other areas (Monteiro-Ferreira, 2014). It allows for key African traditions and values to provide the foundation for the African American culture. Being able to use these values and ideas permits Afrocentricity to be used as a valid background for acquiring and examining data (Asante, 1990).

### **Hope, Hopelessness, and Poverty**

One of the most important problems facing American inner-cities is an adolescent's feelings of hopelessness about the future from living in low-income neighborhoods. In most discussions of inner-city life, resiliency is treated as something very rare that should be celebrated when it is found by these same adolescents. Instead, most youths surrender to the challenging or threatening circumstances they face on a daily basis, which yields to the essence of hopelessness (Bolland, 2003). They have been taught to hate themselves. Anger is not converted back to love unless they understand and are taught their culture because it is difficult to love someone unless you can love yourself (Kunjufu, 2005).

Feelings of hopelessness are associated with essentially every area of at-risk behavior, including violence, substance use, sexuality, and even accidental injury. These feelings of hopelessness are demonstrated higher among males than females which lead to a steeper projectory of their at-risk behaviors (Bolland, 2003). Kunjufu (2005) stated that Black

men kill other Black men because they are allowed to do so. They are taught and encouraged to kill other Black men. As a result of fewer consequences, they are given lighter sentences and more guns (Kunjufu, 2005).

Poverty is associated with many long term effects, such as poor health, increased morality, school failure, high crime, and substance abuse (Murali & Oyebode, 2004). Poverty is also associated with perceived feelings of failure and predicts hopelessness. However, most individuals raised or residing in economically impoverished neighborhoods may not succumb to feelings of hopelessness (Bolland, Lian, & Formichella, 2005). Poverty is stressful for children because of the environment where they grow up. Children living in poverty more likely live in homes that are chaotic, noisy, and crowded (Evans & Kim, 2013).

Drugs and alcohol use transpires openly in the streets, unemployment rates are usually very high, public services are often limited, the stigma of race still exists, and many residents are fearful of crime and victimization in the impoverished neighborhoods. Levels of violence and its potentially traumatizing effects are higher in these neighborhoods. Residents in low-income areas associate a sense of instability, discontinuity, and chaos with their neighborhoods (Bolland, Lian, & Formichella, 2005). Children living in poverty more likely deal with multiple physical and psychological conditions because multiple stressors and environmental demands threaten their bodily equilibrium (Evans & Kim, 2013). Opportunities to create healthy networks and support systems are limited in these neighborhoods. There are feelings of disconnectedness and psychological distress which will contribute to the promotion and perpetuation of feelings of hopelessness and depression (Bolland, Lian, & Formichella, 2005).

Feelings of distress, disconnectedness, and hopelessness brought about by neighborhood-level characteristics are weakened by family relationships. Stable and supported family environments provide children with the emotional security to develop healthy relationships with others and play an important protective role. In low-income neighborhoods, the family can be a compounding source of stress and worry for adolescents (Bolland, Lian, & Formichella, 2005). Parents experience severe financial strain which they feel affects their abilities to be good parents (Evans & Kim, 2013). Hopelessness can be the product of a negative belief about future orientation. Many adolescents feel that it is useless to think or plan for a future that they may not survive to enjoy (Bolland, Lian, & Formichella, 2005).

Kunjufu (2005) said that culture is important because it gives one “a sense of history, a blueprint for living, and a direction for the future” (pg. 166). It is more than how they dress, the food they eat, and the music they listen to; it is a lifestyle with values, history, purpose, and direction. Without culture, there is no past, present, or future and if it is not prevalent, people will be afraid of each other and there will be no trust. They will not combine resources to start new businesses or support existing businesses. As Kunjufu (2005) stated, “People without a culture are dangerous” (pg. 167). It is important that people know themselves and not fall victim to the streets.

### **The Boy Crisis**

Young Black males are at the highest risk for health, violence, and criminal activity when compared to their White counterparts and even Black females (Wilson, 2014). Boys are socialized to be masculine from a very young age. They are often exposed to a tough set of rules and expectations that characterize them a certain way,

such as active, tough, aggressive, competitive, and unemotional to name a few. School is often associated with femininity and is welcoming to girls (Orr, 2011). On many achievement and school adjustment indicators, Black girls tend to do better than Black boys especially in the areas of language and literacy. Black boys also have more behavior issues in school than Black girls which intensifies the need to remediating academic skills where the boys are deficient (Barbarin, 2010). There is a connection which may be hard to break since boys are encouraged to devalue feminine traits and things, and they may be threatened both verbally and physically if they do not conform. As a result, the school environment is not welcoming to boys and they have a hard time imitating behavior expectations. A lack of rewards in school can endorse additional disengagement which leads to an increased drop-out rate and could even crush the desire to continue education beyond high school (Orr, 2011).

The greatest and fastest influence on most Black adolescent males is the streets. There is a direct correlation between age and street time. The older the male gets, the more time he spends on the streets. There is less parent time which gives the boys more freedom. When Black boys are not compelled to attend school, they are often found in the streets. The streets become the teacher, curriculum, and text book. The subjects of sociology, political science, history, biology, and physical science are structured around community norms and are most binding on the street members (Kunjufu, 2005).

At home, most moms do not place high academic expectations on their sons. They seldom assign household chores to their sons. On the other hand, girls are held to a higher academic standard along with sharing a load of the household chores. This double standard reinforces the stigma that school and housework are for girls only. This double

standard creates conflicting expectations in male-female relationships because the female is responsible and she expects the male to be responsible as well. However, the male has not learned any real responsibility, so he expects the female to perform all the household chores, such as cleaning, cooking, taking care of the kids, etc. (Kunjufu, 2005).

Kunjufu (2005) noted that in the home the mom refers to her son both positively as the “little man of the house” and the negatively as that “no-good boy” (pg. 57) which sends a mixed message to these young boys. He noted that there are moms who give everything to their sons and allow them to stay in her home for extended periods of time which does not help the boy grow up to become a man.

America’s public education system has the best platform to deliver the support necessary to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty. It is necessary to position these young boys to secure a high school diploma while preparing them for postsecondary education or work to help break the poverty cycle. It is essential to provide a healthy living and learning environment with the necessary support in order to provide all males with the opportunity to learn (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015).

### **The Achievement Gap**

A high school diploma is a critical entry point to the additional higher education criteria needed to be successful socially, civically, and economically in America (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012). There are a number of systemic reasons why students veer from the college path. Some include poorly executed tracking policies, inadequate educational supports, and zero tolerance policies. Students should learn what they need to know in order to be successful at the next level as they climb the academic ladder so that they are prepared for college, career, and citizenship (Schott Foundation for

Public Education, 2011). However, Black boys are more likely to hit the streets than they are to hit the books. They are more than likely to be placed in special education, suspended, or drop out of school (NEA, 2011).

According to the Schott Foundation for Public Education (2015), the national graduation rate of Black males for the 2012-13 school year was 59% which was an increase from 52% in the 2009-10 school year. The 2012-13 school year marked the first year where more than half of the Black males in 9<sup>th</sup> grade received a diploma four years later (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012). In Alabama, 57% of Black males received a high school diploma in the 2012-13 school years. When compared to 74% of White males who received the same diploma, there was an achievement gap of 15% (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015).

Usually children from poor areas are the least successful by conventional measures and the hardest to teach by traditional standards. They are the least powerful of the school's students, the least able to enforce their privileges or insist their needs be met, and yet they are the most dependent on schools for their educational resources (Connell, 1994).

Carter, Hawkins, and Natesan (2008) found that African American students do not achieve academically at the same rate as their European American peers. The achievement gap exists regardless of socioeconomic status, gender, or geographic location. There is evidence that the cultural aspects of students' lives impact their learning styles. Unless a student is involved in athletics, band, or certain academic and social clubs, they do not get to participate in activities out of town and experience different opportunities not offered in their hometown. Black boys enter kindergarten with



less general worldly knowledge. They are often not likely to identify letters and sound out paired letters which lead to reading. They are less likely to be able to identify colors or even write their name. Although the achievement gap is obvious when a Black boy starts school, the gap continues to widen as they progress because they are underrepresented as low achieving students (Barbarin, 2010). Kunjufu (2005) discussed the concept of the “Fourth Grade Failure Syndrome” (p. 33) which is the poor transition between the primary and intermediate grades. At this level, there is disproportionality where Black boys are placed in special education. Black boys also tend to score lower on standardized test than Black girls.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) put a spotlight on the racial achievement gap which should have been eliminated by 2014. Data collected for the NAEP test showed an achievement gap in the 1970s. The gap began to close in the 1980’s and started increasing again in the 1990s. Closing the gap would require reversing the effects that have caused the gap to widen again. Several states responded to closing the gap using various strategies. Policymakers and educators wanted to focus on the practices of schools that have the most impact on students. While large-scale studies identified those best practices, it was on practices that benefit the student body as a whole, not practices that would specifically help the African American and Latino students (Wenglinsky, 2004). Even though The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) intends to offset inequitable funding, the federal contribution still will not close the gap that exists between high wealth and low poverty schools and the districts that serve them (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2011).

Wenglinsky (2004) discussed two types of achievement gaps: The between-school gap and the with-in school achievement gap. The between-school achievement gap comes from the segregated nature of schools. The with-in school achievement gap comes from the fact that educational experiences differ between classes in the same school and students in the same class. He included reference to another study which documented that most instructional practices that show high achievement in mathematics were less likely to be taught by teachers of black kids than those who taught white kids. The racial achievement gap could be decreased by implementing those best practices in all classes (Wenglinsky, 2004). In high school, Black boys are often less likely to participate in college prep classes and are often tracked into vocational and less demanding classes. They have a lower graduation rate which leads to a lower college attendance rate than their White counterparts (Barbarin, 2010).

From the perspective of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), disproportionality is defined as the comparisons made among groups of students by race who are identified for special education and other related services. When students from one particular race are identified at higher rates compared to all other students, then that group may be said to be disproportionately represented (ALSDE, 2010). Schott Foundation for Public Education (2015) studied disproportionality by race and gender in school suspensions while Gardner, Rizzi, and Council (2014) viewed disproportionality as the underachievement and unbalanced placement of minority males.

Suspension from school results in loss of instructional time, which negatively affects academic achievement. Suspensions and expulsions cause students to not be able to interact with their peers, which affect their social development. The national average

suspension rate for Black males is much higher than males of other races. The reason this number is so high does not have to do with the number of discipline issues, but because Black boys may be punished more severely than the other boys (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015). Suspension and expulsions do not foster positive healthy learning and living communities. If the Black boy is pushed out of school, the chances of him realizing his personal, academic, and monetary potential are greatly reduced (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015). Students who are suspended are three times more likely to drop out of school by the 10th grade. The rampant use of suspension of Black boys as a default disciplinary action undermines the goal of closing the achievement gap because the number of dropouts increases while valuable learning time decreases. Those students who do drop out are three times more likely to be incarcerated as they get older (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012).

Gardner, Rizzi, and Council (2014) stated that the impact of poor academic skills is not limited to just being an underachieving student. The effect it causes is felt in the community as well as across the nation. In order for Black males to achieve, they must have access to a quality education throughout their academic years. When high schools do not have a curriculum that prepares kids for college or when students move from school to school, money, resources, and time are wasted (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2011).

Harper and Wood (2016) studied disproportionality at the middle school level because middle school is a critical period in the Black male student's life. The middle school years are a difficult time for most adolescents because they are dealing with being socially accepted and being successful achievers in school which is especially hard for

the Black male student. The overrepresentation of Black boys in special education becomes a new type of segregation that is an even bigger deal than tracking. There is a consistent trend of less inclusion for Black boys who receive special education services. The accommodations and modifications for these students placed in special education are often inadequate or inappropriate. Black boys are also subjected to higher levels of suspension and expulsion so it is important to understand the long-term effects of these suspensions and expulsions so that phenomena such as the school-to-prison pipeline and unemployment can be better understood (Harper & Wood, 2016).

There is an underrepresentation of Black boys who take Advanced Placement (AP) and honors classes which creates another type of segregation (Harper & Wood, 2016). The College Board recommends that all students should be granted the opportunity to take AP classes even though it is still not a reality (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012).

### **Teacher and Student Relationships**

Milner (2006) conducted a study that looked at the experience and impact of the Black teacher on the Black student and attempted to focus on what is known about successful Black teachers of Black students. The study looks at the practices of Black teachers and their success with Black students to offer some insight for any teacher who might teach Black students. There is a need to recruit more Black teachers to teach all students. For deeper learning to occur for the Black student there is a need for changes in the way teachers are educated. It is essential for the Black teacher to serve as a role model to help students decide on future professions and visualize the possibilities of their life. Being a role model can help increase the number of Black teachers entering the

profession. As a result of a shared culture, Black teachers have the ability to construct meaningful instructional examples for their students which allows for deeper meaning. Teaching and learning extend beyond the classroom because the Black teacher may go to the same church or live in the same neighborhood as the Black student which enables a deeper relationship between teacher and student (Milner, 2006). Black teachers can boost the self-worth of their Black students because the students are exposed to professionals who look like them (Neason, 2016).

Milner (2006) concluded that a teacher from any ethnic background can effectively teach Black students, but instruction needs to be personally and culturally meaningful. The loss of the Black teacher and the interactions between teacher and student can be disadvantageous and have a negative and lasting impact on overall student success (Milner, 2006). As the United States moves further into the 21st century, the population of Black students will steadily increase. Douglas, Lewis, Douglas, Scott, and Garrison-Wade (2008) found that more than ever, these students are being taught by someone who is not of their racial or cultural background. In 2004, the U.S. Department of Education reported that 87% of elementary and secondary teachers are White while only 8% are Black. The remaining 5% were not named by ethnicity. During the 2011-2012 school years, only 18% of teachers were people of color. Educational leaders are also predominately White. In the 2011-2012 school years, only 20% of school principals were Black (United States Department of Education, 2016). As a result of the achievement gap and the fact that the Black student is mainly being taught by a White teacher, it is important that White teachers learn about the impact they have on their Black students. The discussion of the lack of academic success of the Black student

usually leads to a discussion of external factors such as home environment and lack of parental support. There is little known about the effectiveness that White teachers have on the achievement of Black students. This study recommended that White teachers take a more active role in promoting academic achievement for the Black student. White teachers can do this by holding Black students to the same academic standard as White students, understand how their pedagogy has an effect on the black student, make conscious efforts to push the Black student to greater academic achievement, and reverse the stereotype that White teachers may have about Black students. All students should have a fair and equitable education (Douglas, Scott, & Garrison-Wade, 2008).

Ladson-Billings (2000) stated that schools and teachers treat the language, prior knowledge, and values of the Black student as abnormal and often presume that it needs to be done away with. Teachers' preparation programs are responsible for the failure of teachers to teach Black students even though no single class or field experience is capable of preparing preservice to students to meet the needs of these diverse learners. Student field experiences are often spent in White urban area schools. This creates a different set of challenges than those experienced in classrooms with Black students, which causes teachers to be unprepared to teach Black students. Spending a limited amount of time in an urban classroom serves to reinforce student teacher's stereotypes and racist attitudes towards Black students because they do not understand African American culture and practices.

Kunjufu (2005) noted that it is important for Black boys to be exposed to positive male role models. Martino and Kehler (2006) stated that there are intensified calls for more male role models in elementary schools. There is a continued decline of men who

choose to enter the field of education. Most males that our Black boys encounter in school are custodians, security guards, physical education teachers, or administrators. It is a rare experience to encounter a male instructional leader. Kunjufu (2005) stated that from the years of Kindergarten to Grade 8, Black boys may encounter a maximum of two male teachers. Black male teachers work mainly in high school and this is past the all-important turning point of fourth grade. Administrators have a tendency to place the best teachers which includes the male teachers in the higher grades as a way to maintain discipline for the most disorderly students. Kunjufu (2005) considers this a “Band Aid approach” (pg. 39) to a problem which should have been addressed in the primary grades so that it would not continue to occur in the higher grades.

While every school may need a substitute teacher every so often, high-poverty schools are often staffed by a rotating group of substitute teachers. Classroom teachers resign or leave at the end of the school year or even midyear, leaving students without a stable certified teacher. The repeated use of substitutes with varying levels of ability and education does not allow students to have the committed level of learning that they are entitled to have. There appears to be teacher shortages across the United States and all school systems are struggling to fill vacancies. Teaching children in poverty is hard because the children are usually not proficient and need to be caught up. Studies have shown that teachers who work in high-poverty schools are absent more frequently, which adds to instability for the students. High-poverty schools tend to hire more inexperienced teachers who are not trained for working in these intense environments. This causes the new teachers to leave or else not be rehired because they are seen as inadequate when in

fact, they did not receive the support they needed in the classroom to help these kids (Brown, 2015).

There is a high turnover rate of minority teachers. Between 1988 and 2008, 24% of minority teachers were more likely to leave the educational field than White teachers. Some years, there are more minority teachers to leave the field than those who enter it. There are many reasons minority teachers leave the education profession. Minority teachers are more likely to work at high-poverty, low-performing schools, which have high turnover rates among all teachers. Working conditions at these schools make teaching more difficult because they are teaching high needs kids with insufficient resources. Federal and state policies have increased the tension in these schools because principals and teachers at these failing schools are removed or else the schools are closed down (Neason, 2016).

### **Gang Activity and Involvement**

The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) stated that there is no universally agreed-upon definition of "gang" (pg. 1) in the United States, but the term itself is widely used in mainstream coverage with a main reference which is often associated with youth gangs. There are both federal and state definitions of what a gang is. Both definitions include being comprised of three or more members who share an identity with a group and are recognized by others as a gang. There is usually some type of organization and permanence and the group is associated with delinquent or criminal activity (National Institute of Justice, n.d). While people think that joining a gang is often coerced, most youth want to actually join the gang for various reasons, such as acceptance or protection (United States Department of Justice, 2014).



Although gangs have been prominent in other areas of the United States, they did not begin to form until later in the South since there was no large central city with concentrated gang activity (Howell & Moore, 2010). While it is known that gang members account for an unequal amount of violence, it is not understood how these crimes are organized. While the image of gangs is perceived as oppositional groups whose structure leads to rival violence, there is more violence among members of the same gang (Decker & Curry, 2002). Youth gangs are not a new phenomenon and pose a serious problem for today's young people and their communities. Serious and violent crimes typically escalate at a higher rate while affiliated with a gang as opposed to time spent before joining a gang or after leaving the gang. While participating in gang activity, there is more of a desire and inclination to be violent and members are more likely to become a victim of violence. Communities are negatively affected by gangs because the quality of life is affected. When a school is weakened by factors such as low achievement, poor attendance, high drop-out rates, and a disrupted classroom environment, the community then becomes an undesirable place to live and raise a family (United States Department of Justice, 2014).

Pyrooz and Sweeten (2014) conducted a study about gang membership and found that young gang members were disproportionately Black and Hispanic males from single parent homes with families living below the poverty level. Through their study, they discovered that there are more than one million juveniles involved in gangs in the U. S. This is astounding because law enforcement data more likely includes older gang members because they are more criminally involved and more violent. Young juveniles

who experiment with gangs or gang members in name only are less likely to be included in law enforcement data and will only be counted in surveys (Pyrooz & Sweeten, 2014).

### **Incarceration of the Black Male**

The “school to prison pipeline” (pg. 1) is a term used to define the process used to push children-particularly children of color- out of school and into the criminal justice system (Adamu & Hogan, 2015). The prevalence of Black men in the correctional system has caused the number of four-year old Black males to be used as a model to determine the number of people who will be incarcerated in the next 15-to-20 years. The rationale for this is because the more Black boys in preschool, the higher the need for prisons to be built for when these young men come of age (Barbarin, 2010). Black school-aged children are three times more likely to be suspended or expelled than compared to their peers. Black boys account for every two out of three suspensions. Suspending or expelling children at a young age have profound consequences because the early years are formative for forming relationships with teachers and peers. Instead, school becomes a place where they are not welcome or supported. When young students are suspended or expelled, they are more likely to experience further disciplinary problems later in their academic career. They may fail a grade, drop out of school, or end up incarcerated (Adamu & Hogan, 2015). These boys are labeled and often placed in an alternative school where few are reintroduced back into regular school. As a result, these same boys are eventually expelled or just drop out. This leaves them with a lot of unsupervised time where they can end up on the wrong side of the law. After they are caught, these boys end up in a juvenile center, which is often seen as a finishing school. Once in the system, most end up as repeat offenders, which make it difficult to break the cycle and leave the

system. As a consequence of this cycle, many of these Black youth grow up to be Black men who are not equipped to participate in the home, community, or work environment (Barbarin, 2010).

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, Black males are incarcerated five times more than their White counterparts. Blacks comprise of 13% of the U. S. population, yet 40% of the incarcerated population. This creates a disproportionality is created when compared to White and Latino males who make up 64% and 16% of the U.S .population and 39% and 19% of the incarcerated population respectively. In addition, Black males are overrepresented in Alabama jails as well. Black males comprise of 26% of the total state population and 54% of the incarcerated population (Sankala, 2014).

At the end of 2014, there were an estimated 516,900 Black males incarcerated in state or federal prisons. Black males comprised of 37% of the entire male prison population. Black males in the age bracket of 18-19 years of age are 10 times more likely to be locked up in state or federal prison than their White or Hispanic peers.

Imprisonment for Black males of all age groups was 3.5 to 10.5 times higher than the same age levels of White males and 1.4 to 3.1 times higher than Hispanic males. The majority of prisons in Alabama are operating in a state of overcrowding (Carson, 2015).

By the age of 14, about 25% of Black children have a parent who has been incarcerated for some amount of time. In most of these cases, it is the father who is incarcerated. Children of incarcerated parents suffer worse cognitive and non-cognitive problems than those whose parents have not been incarcerated at all. They are more prone to having learning disabilities, poor physical health issues, and speech problems, such as stuttering (Morsy & Rothstein, 2016). Incarceration also affects the family's

socioeconomic status because there is little or no money contributed to the household by the incarcerated parent. Once the incarcerated parent is released financial worries continue because the parent may have difficulty finding a job (Morsy & Rothstein, 2016). Family life itself is impacted and unstable since visiting a parent in jail is stressful because the child cannot play or interact with the incarcerated parent. Children are less likely to be supervised at home because the non-incarcerated parent may have to work longer hours to make ends meet (Morsy & Rothstein, 2016).

### **The Impact of Social Media, Rap Music, and the Street Code**

Social media sites have attracted millions of users who integrate its use on an almost daily basis. The main purpose of social media is not to meet strangers and meet new people, but to allow communication with people that they already know (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). The fact that today's youth are so connected to global online communities is frightening to both parents and educators (Ahn, 2011).

Rap music emerged from the streets of inner-city neighborhoods to serve as a reflection of the hopes, concerns, and aspirations of the Black youth (Kubrin, 2005). Many inner-city neighborhoods are defined by the combined effects of poverty, unemployment, family disruption, and isolation from mainstream America. This has led to social disorganization and violence. Disadvantaged communities have an opportunity structure yet illegitimate opportunities for success appear far more attractive (Kurbin, 2005). The presence of drugs generates an increase of illegitimate opportunities. The street corners are bought and sold causing turf wars to ensue. Neighborhood residents of the poverty areas are in the most need of police protection but are distrustful of the police because of racial profiling and being wrongfully accused (Kurbin, 2005).

The street code articulates powerful norms and characterizes public social relations among residents particularly with respect to violence. The gun is a symbol of power and a remedy for all disputes. The easy access to guns in the inner city has raised the stakes of the street code even higher. Building a violent reputation not only commands respect but serves to deter future assaults. Violence is considered an appropriate reaction to crime-not a crime itself. The offender operates on the assumption that the victim provoked his own injury or death. The street code highlights the appreciation for material wealth as a way to establish self-image and gain respect. The worsening conditions of the inner-city communities over the last several decades have given rise to the street code. These conditions define the context in which rap music has emerged (Kubrin, 2005). Music lyrics have situational and situated meaning. These lyrics instruct its listeners in how to make sense of urban street violence and how to understand the identities of those who participate in it or avoid it (Kubrin, 2005).

According to Kubrin (2005), the street code theme is prominently represented in rap lyrics with the main theme being respect followed closely by violence. Projecting the right image is everything, and backing it up with violence is expected. Rap represents this by describing acts of violence on others. Firearms are a way to claim identity as being the toughest and are called street sweepers, pumps, and other names depending on the score they need to settle. Guns are an everyday accessory in the ghetto. Rap lyrics show how toughness and a willingness to use violence are articulated as a central feature of masculine identity and reputation. The code of the street is used implicitly and explicitly in rapper's lyrics by providing a recipe on how to create a violent viable street identity. A person has to be tough to survive (Kubrin, 2005).

Social identity and respect are the most important features of the street code. Lyrics instruct listeners that toughness and the willingness to use violence are central to establishing a viable masculine identity, respect, and a reputation. The code makes it clear that payback for disrespect is imminent. Lyrics mark the border between acceptable and unacceptable behavior and how to respond to those situations.

### **Parental Involvement**

Parents and families are a child's first teacher and play an important role in a child's life (Barbain, 2010). Parental involvement is a topic that continues to be the focus of academic research and debate (McNeal, 2014). Parental involvement is just one factor that contributes to the academic success of public school students. However, many middle and high school teachers indicate that they only confer with parents when the student is in trouble (Epstein, 1995; Epstein 2008). Parental involvement is influenced by resources, such as time and money (Wilson, 2014). Studies show that parental involvement throughout high school is important for students' academic success (Epstein, 2008). There is an accepted stereotype that Black parents are disinterested in their child's education (Cousins & Mickleson, 2011). A parent's expectation is influential to their children, especially with views on race and gender (Wilson, 2014).

There is a notion that increased parental involvement will cure the problem of poor school performance especially when comparing the U.S. with other industrialized countries. While there is a wealth of research on the relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement, there is not enough literature that explains how parental involvement affects a student's attitudes and behaviors towards academic performances (McNeal, 2014). Kunjufu (2005) stated that parents may be more

motivated and involved if schools could show parents that they do make a difference and that monitoring homework and television is important. Parents need to be shown that investing money into education will yield a greater investment than spending so much money on a new car or clothing.

The Black home has a lot of stimuli, and is often labeled as chaotic by educators and psychologists. There is usually more than one child in the household, usually more than one radio and TV playing loudly with different songs and shows, and a multitude of adults coming and going throughout the day (Kunjufu, 2005).

Minority parents play an indispensable role in their child's education experiences by collaborating with educators (Gardner, 2014). As a student's age increases, parental involvement decreases (Kunjufu, 2005). Kunjufu (2005) stated that the difference between private school parents and public school parents is that one pays the school directly through tuition and the other pays the school indirectly through taxes. Schools still belong to the parents and if they are not satisfied with teacher quality, they can organize together and decide to rally to have the teacher removed or keep the children home and homeschool them.

Epstein (2008) noted that all parents value education. However, they want and need more information regarding child development, high school programs, graduation information, college and career planning, and community programs for their kids. When families are involved, there is an increase in English and math grades, improved reading and writing skills, more earned credits, better attendance, and fewer discipline problems (Epstein, 2008).

According to Sledge (2012), there are biased ideas about the family structure and the negative influence it has on Black families. The 2012 U. S. Census showed that 62% of Black children lived in two-parent homes while 55% of Black children lived in a single parent home (United States Census Bureau, 2012). Absence of the father in the child's life is often the reason for Black children's experience of issues in discipline, academic success, and psychological health (Sledge, 2012). The single mother is more involved in the child's education when the father is absent (Cousins & Mickleson, 2011).

Socioeconomic status is lower in a single-parent home than a two-parent home, especially if there is more than one child in the household. The older children may have to assist in taking care of the younger children. The Black household may also include extended family members, since relying on family for support is a tradition in the Black home (Sledge, 2012). The number of households that include extended family was 26% for families living under the poverty level (U. S. Census, 2012).

The family's socioeconomic status and education level affects the children. Families with a low socioeconomic status and education may require children to gain employment as opposed to furthering their education which can cause a negative view on education (Sledge, 2012). An examination of what parents do when they are involved in their child's education, especially when faced with barriers of not feeling invited or welcomed at school, needs to be done so that educators can better understand parental involvement and effectiveness of school programs (Cousins & Mickleson, 2011).

Black boys would be less likely to fail if parents limit the time boys are in the streets. Parents need to know who their sons are spending time with. While not all peer



groups are bad, parents need to understand who their son's peer groups are so that they can understand how well their son can handle himself in any situation (Kunjufu, 2005).

### **The Black Male's Pathway to Success**

While Black males are making progress to further their education or work in their communities, these accomplishments are not given the same amount of publicity as the negative perceptions and stories (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012). The same studies that emphasize Black male crises also identify Black male successes. There are schools which have a 100% Black male graduation rate, and schools which have a transformed climate and culture which provide more equitable treatment for the Black male student. The reason for these successes is because the solutions were focused on more than the underlying symptoms (NEA, 2011).

Barbarin (2010) discussed ways that families, schools, and communities could do to help improve outcomes for Black boys so that they can be successful. Black children do better when parents “eXpose, eXplain, and eXpand” (pg 85). This is where families provide enrichment that builds skills and experiences that add to the knowledge a child has about the world. The family uses conversations to help the child make sense of experiences and to understand how things work. Scaffolding is used to build bridges between what a child knows and what is to be learned. Schools can help Black boys by providing a high quality education that acknowledges the challenges of the Black boy in school. Boys should have strong positive emotional support from the school and its teachers. Schools and teachers should use instructional strategies that motivate and engage the Black boy instead of making him feel alienated. Black boys should be taught how to be caring, responsible, and ethical. Communities play an important part in the

long term positive and negative outcome of the Black boy's success. They can raise consciousness about the boy's struggle and move their concerns into action. They can increase the involvement of male role models that the boys come in contact with (Barbarin, 2010)

Harper and Wood (2016) discussed Black male student success from preschool to doctoral level. Schools should be a place where adults and Black male students can come together to help young Black men establish identities that “encompass healthy, racial gender, and achievement self-conceptions” (p. 46). It is important that Black boys recognize themselves as successful achievers using positive racial expression which can serve as a buffer when they face racial disparity in school. Parents need to teach their sons about the significance of race and racism in their education as well as life. Socialization practices should start in early infancy so that a positive racial identity will provide them with a solid foundation of their overall identity in the middle school years and beyond. Black boys need to develop resilient, adaptive behaviors for academic success in school. Parents, teachers, and other adults who play a key role in the lives of young adolescent Black boys have to encourage these young men to believe in themselves so that they can reach their full potential in their lives long after middle and high school (Harper & Wood, 2016)..

Today's school environment does not often allow teachers to observe each other or have dialogue about the adolescent Black male and academics which causes stereotypes and biases to go unobserved so these segregations, whether intentional or unintentional, still exists. Teachers need to engage in professional development opportunities which allow them to examine their beliefs about the Black male student and

to learn strategies that will help them view Black male students as academic achievers (Harper & Wood, 2016).

Most Black males do not graduate college because of a lack of academics, but because of lack of financial funds. For some reason, students tend to receive less financial aid each passing year of college. This is odd because it appears that they should receive more money. Black males who attend college on an athletic scholarship have more financial stability, which is one reason why those males do graduate with a college degree (Kunjufu, 2005).

Kunjufu (2005) discussed two more reasons why graduation rates are low. One is because of a feeling of loneliness or lack of belonging, especially if Black students are on a majority White campus. A second reason is due to the lack of discipline and time management because many students have additional responsibilities, such as athletics, jobs, and family. However, many students that do have additional responsibilities tend to have a higher GPA because they have less free time to do as they wish. On the flipside, Black students who do study have a tendency of being accused of being White because they will spend time in the library instead of the dorm (Kunjufu, 2005).

### **Qualitative Phenomenological Study**

According to Creswell (2007), a phenomenological study describes meaning for several people through experiences in which they have lived which create a phenomenon. It addresses questions about everyday experiences that are believed to be an important psychological or sociological phenomenon of our time or typical group of people (Mirriam & Associates, 2002). The researcher attempts to understand the behavior from the participant's viewpoint and perspective (Simon & Goes, 2011).

The researcher collects data from several individuals who have lived and shared the phenomenon which developed a composite description of the essence of the experience for all (Creswell, 2007).

Interviews with participants are the primary data collection form (Creswell, 2007). These in-depth interviews gather the participants' detailed descriptions of their experiences (Simon & Goes, 2011). Although interviews are usually the most important data method, the researcher may use a participant's documents, which include either written or oral self-reports, participant observations, and art such as poetry (Creswell, 2007; Simon & Goes, 2011).

In a phenomenological study, the researcher analyzes the data for significant statements and a description of the essence and structure of a phenomenon (Merriam and Associates, 2002; Creswell, 2007). Merriam and Associates (2002) goes on to say that the participant and his or her world are interrelated and interdependent. Simon and Goes (2011) stated that during the data analysis process that the researcher's focus should be on understanding the meaning of the description of the phenomenon. The participants should ensure that their views and comments are not misinterpreted by the researcher through an audit trail and member checking (Simon & Goes, 2011). The data is constructed into themes and repetitious statements are removed. The researcher constructs a synthesis of textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon being studied (Merriam & Associates, 2002).

### **Research Questions**

The central question that was explored in this study was: What does hope and success mean and look like to the Black male in the Black Belt Region?

The sub-questions that assisted in the research were:

1. What are the differences that motivated these Black males to decide that school and education were important and the key to a better life than the one in which they were living?
2. What themes of academic success by Black males appear to emerge from their encounters within the high school setting?
3. What caused these impoverished young Black males to construct meaning about their feelings and experiences towards a better life?
4. What are some challenges and solutions for achieving academic success through resiliency?

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### Aim of the Study

The aim of this study was to explore Black male students and identify central meanings and themes of academic success that are common among them. In order to answer the research questions of this study, interviews with nine Black males were conducted. It was expected that each participant would bring a unique perspective to this study. The interview consisted mainly of open-ended questions which allowed the researcher to facilitate true individuality in the participant's responses to each question. The input from each participant was used to construct meaning to understand the resiliency and grit that led to their academic success to graduate and enter college, the workforce, or the military.

### Qualitative Research Approach

Phenomenology is important to understand several people's common or shared experiences. A phenomenological study allows the researcher to maintain a focus on the commonality found among the participants and their experiences of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Likewise, the writer sought to learn from the lived experiences of nine Black males who lived and attended school in a city characterized by violence, gang activity, drugs, and generational poverty. This study viewed the commonalities of each young man in the relationship to academic success and resilience. In addition to forming an understanding around what and how they experienced this phenomenon, the writer sought to identify those internal and external factors which participants attribute to their resilience. This study examined the wisdom of nine Black males who lived in this experience in order to understand the phenomenon that they experienced as real life to

convey their experience. It is important that the writer set aside any experiences that she has and take a fresh perspective towards the phenomenon being studied (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were Black males who graduated from the local high school in the school system where the writer is employed. Out of all of potential graduates, nine Black males were asked to participate in this study. The participants met the following criteria: (a) Black male (b) graduated from high school (c) currently enrolled in a two-or four-year college or university, serving in the military, or employed in the workforce. The young men ranged in age from 20-27. Three participants were employed in the workforce; two participants were enrolled in college; one participant was serving in the military; in addition, three participants recently graduated from college with Bachelor degrees and were employed in the workforce.

The writer used a snowballing sampling technique to assist in identifying potential interview participants in order to obtain a clearer picture of factors in the participant's ability to exhibit resiliency. Snowballing includes the use of informants, such as, teachers, administrators, and coaches to help identify potential participants (Creswell, 2007). Criterion sampling was also used because all participants had to meet some specific criteria for the purpose of the study (Creswell, 2007).

Before beginning the interview process, the participants were asked to read and sign an informed consent form. Within the consent form, the purpose of the study and any risks involved were explained. In addition, the procedures by which the data would be collected were discussed. Participants were able to refuse to participate or withdraw

from the study at any time without being penalized. The writer answered any questions the participants had concerning anonymity. They were assured that all study-related documents would be locked in a file cabinet while they were not in use. Each participant was allowed to pick a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. In the findings, narrative quotes did not contain any identifying information.

### **Data Collection Tools**

Phenomenological studies tend to rely on interviews for the interest in the meaning of the phenomenon studied (Englander, 2012). In this study, an in-depth, open-ended interview with the nine participants was conducted either face-to-face or on the telephone (Appendix B). A second confirming interview was held to ensure that the participants had a chance to review the transcribed interview information. Questions were developed by the writer based on the research questions of the study and the research used in the literature review. The interview questions gave the participants the opportunity to provide answers in their own words using their views, values, and experiences (Creswell, 2007).

A preliminary meeting with the participants was conducted before the actual interview. The purpose of the preliminary meeting was to establish trust with the participants, review ethical considerations, and complete consent forms. Englander (2012) noted that a preliminary meeting gives the participant time to “dwell and ponder on the experience” (pg. 27).

The participants kept a journal during the study. In the journal, the participants reflected on the first interview and recorded any additional information that they may not have thought of during the interview and wanted to share in the second interview. The



purpose of the journal was to enable the researcher to obtain the actual words used by the participants because it provided written evidence in addition to the transcribed recordings from the first and second interview. The journal represented thoughtful data because the participants have given attention to the study while compiling their thoughts (Creswell, 2014).

### **Procedures**

The writer first obtained permission from Nova's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the study. Once approval was granted, the writer sent a letter to the participants which explained the purpose of the study and requested their permission to be interviewed for the study. A preliminary meeting was conducted with each participant so that consent forms were signed and any concerns about the study were addressed. Each participant was interviewed individually for the actual interviews. These interviews were conducted face-to-face or on the telephone. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions and lasted approximately 40-60 minutes. Even though the interview questions were scripted, the writer had no idea what the content of the responses would be. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed by the writer. The purpose of the second interview and the journals allowed the participant to provide more information without the writer adding to the interview where it appeared that the data represented the writer's thoughts. The second interview took place approximately two to three weeks after the first interview.

Interview protocol as described by Creswell (2014) was followed. Each set of interview notes had the following:

1. Heading with the date, place, and participants

2. Instructions of standard procedures for the interviewer to follow
3. The interview questions
4. Probes for the interview questions
5. Space between the questions for answers
6. A final thank-you statement to acknowledge the time the interviewee gave to the study

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis involved making sense of the text from the interviews (Creswell, 2014). The data for this study was analyzed using a modified van Kaam method for phenomenological data analysis proposed by Moustakas (1994). The use of this methodology added value to the meaning of events experienced and described by the participants. It also explored the descriptions of experience.

After each interview, the writer labeled field notes with a pseudonym chosen by each participant. Data were transcribed using Microsoft Word so that it could be categorized into central themes for qualitative analysis along with the van Kaam method to aid in storage, organization, and representation of the data used for analysis. The data were analyzed to reveal major themes relating to the research questions. These themes are categorized through a process of coding and finally represented in figures, tables, and discussion (Creswell, 2007).

The seven steps of the modified van Kaam method of phenomenological analysis as presented by Moustakas (1994) were used to analyze the data in this study included listing and preliminary grouping, reduction and elimination, clustering and thematizing of the invariant constituents, final identification of the invariant constituents and themes,

generation of individual textural descriptions, construction of individual textural descriptions, construction of individual structural descriptions, and the production of textual structural descriptions. In a final step, the analysis used composite descriptions which represented the group as a whole.

The first four steps of the van Kaam method (Moustakas, 1994) were used to reveal the invariant constituents and thematic categories of the data. The invariant constituents represented the experiences and perceptions of the participants with respect to the factors they perceived as contributing to their personal academic success and achievement. This analysis process was completed using Microsoft Word to code the transcribed text of the interviews and note the location and frequency of each invariant constituent. Afterwards, the key invariant constituents were separated into themes which fell into three major headings.

The first step of the modified van Kaam method included horizontalization where every relevant expression made by the participants was identified. The next step of the data analysis included reduction and elimination of the invariant constituents identified in the first step. The invariant constituents were re-evaluated the relevance to the phenomenon being investigated. Additionally, invariant constituents were evaluated against other invariant constituents to identify those expressions that were relevant to the study. It also allowed for overlapping, repetitive, and vague expressions to be eliminated (Moustakas, 1994).

The third step included clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents into thematic categories which served as the core of the study. The related invariant

constituents were grouped together into categories represented by a common theme that was represented by the common experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994).

The fourth step of the analysis process included checking the invariant constituents and themes against the complete record of each participant to see if the themes were expressed explicitly or compatible (Moustakas, 1994).

Step five included the use of relevant, validated invariant constituents and themes which created individual textural description of each individual participant. Specific examples of verbatim examples from the interview text of each participant were also generated. Next in step six, imaginative variation was constructed for each description in order to more clearly express the relevant experiences of each participant (Moustakas, 1994).

In the final step, the developments of composite textural-structural descriptions were developed. These textural-structural descriptors represented the experienced of the participants as a whole group. These descriptors represented the conclusions of the data analysis and are used to answer the research questions of the study (Moustakas, 1994).

All data sources were analyzed so that significant statements, sentences, or quotes that provided an understanding of how each participant experienced the phenomenon were emphasized. The journal data were used to reinforce themes found in the transcribed audio data along with any new emerging themes.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Since qualitative studies allowed the writer to get close to the participants, it is important to be considerate to ethical consideration (Hatch, 2002; Creswell, 2007). The participants revealed what went on behind the scenes of their everyday lives and trusted

the writer to keep these details private (Hatch, 2002). Confidentiality was maintained by securing the records in a locked file cabinet in the writer's home. Anonymity of the participants was preserved by providing the participants with an assigned pseudonym. The data were coded and stored either in a pass-coded electronic file or locked in a file cabinet in the writer's home.

### **Trustworthiness**

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), trustworthiness involves establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. To establish credibility, member checking was used. The data, categories, interpretations, and conclusions were tested for accuracy by taking the specific themes back to the participants of the study group and determining if the participants felt the findings were accurate. Participants were given an opportunity to review their transcribed interviews and add to or amend their statements (Creswell, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Transferability uses thick description to define the findings (Creswell, 2014). When a phenomenon is described in adequate detail, other perspectives can begin to evaluate the extent to which the conclusions found can be transferred to other times, settings, situations, and people (Lincoln & Cuba, 1985).

Confirmability was established by triangulation which involved using multiple data sources in an investigation to produce understanding and confirm emerging findings of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mirriam & Associates, 2002). This technique examines evidence from the sources and builds a coherent justification from the themes (Creswell, 2014).

## Potential Research Bias

The purpose of reducing potential bias is not to make everyone in the study the same but to be considerate when asking and delivering questions which will allow the participants to reveal their true feelings without misrepresenting them. Sarniak (2015) discussed different types of participant and researcher bias.

The types of participant bias that may be encountered in this study included acquiescence bias, social desirability bias, and sponsor bias. Acquiescence bias occurs when the participant demonstrates a tendency to be agreeable with everything the researcher says or does. The participants think every idea is a good idea which could be part of the participant's personality or because the participant views the researcher as an expert on the topic being studied (Sarniak, 2015).

Social desirability bias involves respondents answering questions in a way that they think will lead to them being viewed positively. Regardless of the research format or the researcher conducting the study, some participants will report inaccurately on sensitive or personal topics to present themselves in a positive manner. This bias can be minimized by focusing on an unconditional positive regard which includes phrasing questions to show the participant that it is okay to answer in a way that is negative or undesirable. The researcher can ask indirect questions for sensitive topics because the participants are allowed to show their own feelings about others and still provide truthful answers (Sarniak, 2015).

Sponsor bias occurs when the participants know the researcher of the study. This allows the participant's feelings and opinions about the researcher to display bias in their

answers. The researcher needs to maintain a neutral position throughout the study by limiting their responses to the participant's positive feedback (Sarniak, 2015).

Researcher bias includes confirmation bias, culture bias, and question-order bias. Confirmation bias occurs when a researcher has certain belief and uses participants' information and responses to confirm the belief. This type of bias takes place as soon as the question is answered. The researcher judges and weighs the participant's responses which confirms their beliefs as relevant and reliable, while dismissing any evidence which doesn't support their beliefs. This bias hinders analysis because the researcher may only remember the points that support their beliefs. In order for a researcher to minimize confirmation bias, they must continually reevaluate impressions of the participants and challenge preexisting assumptions and beliefs (Sarniak, 2015).

Assumptions about motivations and influences about a certain culture that are based on the researcher's views create culture bias. The researcher should not judge another culture solely by the values and standards of her own culture. To minimize any culture bias, researchers must move toward cultural relativism by showing unconditional positive regard and being cognizant of their own cultural assumptions although complete cultural relativism is never 100 percent achievable.

The order of the questions should be taken into consideration because one question can influence answers to subsequent questions. Participants are aware of the words and ideas presented in questions and allow them to impact their thoughts, feelings and attitudes on successive questions that the researcher asks. While the order in which questions are asked cannot always be avoided, it is helpful if the researcher asks generalized questions before asking specific ones in order to minimize bias. For example,

the researcher can ask a question with a positive response before asking a question that requires a negative or sensitive response.

Bracketing allowed the researcher to put away her repertoire of knowledge, beliefs, values, and experiences in order to fully and accurately understand and describe the participants' life experiences (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013). Since the researcher is a former teacher of all nine of the participants, it was important that she puts aside what she knew about the participants in order to become aware of what they had to contribute to the study.

It is important that the researcher was aware of her own preconceptions and beliefs so that they could be put aside as she conducted the interviews, data collection, and analysis. The researcher needed to be aware of her own values, interests, perceptions, and thoughts so they could be set aside so they would not influence the research process (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013). The researcher grew up in the area where the study was conducted and has seen it when it was prosperous and as it has slowly declined. The researcher is still currently employed at the high school from which the participants graduated.

The researcher used a journal to write down her thoughts, feelings, and perceptions which allowed her to re-examine her position when issues that may have affected the study were raised. This process allowed her to consciously acknowledge her perceptions and values and reflect on the study (Ortlipp, 2008).



## Chapter 4: Findings

This phenomenological study captured the life and academic experiences of nine Black males and what they perceived as factors contributing to their academic success. While each young man's experiences are unique to them, there were common themes found among them. Their experiences are presented in this chapter so that they can help the reader understand the issues and challenges experienced by the participants and how they used resiliency and grit to overcome these challenges. The qualitative phenomenological design helped the researcher to gather actual accounts, perceptions, and experiences of these young men. This chapter begins by sharing the background stories of each participant. Participants' names have been replaced with pseudonyms selected by the participants to maintain anonymity and confidentiality of the participants. Next, the analysis of data collected from the interviews with the young men and three common themes are described: 1) the meaning of academic success; 2) the role of the stakeholders; and 3) a boy's only club.

### Participant's Backgrounds

The researcher interviewed nine Black male students who graduated from the local high school. Of these nine participants, two participants were enrolled in college and both worked while attending school, three were employed in the work force, one was serving in the military, and three had graduated from college with a bachelor's degree and were employed in their prospective degree fields (Appendix C). At the time of the interview, these young men ranged from 20 to 29 years old. A detailed chart of their demographics is found in Appendix D. The researcher discusses each participant's background below.

**Nick.** Nick was born and raised in the city where the study took place. He lives in a two-parent home and both of his parents have been married for a number of years. Both parents have college degrees and work outside of the home. He was an only child for six years until his younger brother was born. Growing up, life was busy. The family was rarely home because they participated in various activities, such as church, sports, activities related to his parent's jobs, etc. Nick stated that he did not like nor dislike not being at home as much because it gave him the opportunity to experience different things.

Nick attended elementary, middle, and high school in the same school system. He took all honors classes in middle school. He participated in the school system's Early College Program until the program ended due to lack of funding. In spite of the program ending, he continued to take college classes and graduated with an advanced high school diploma and two associate degrees. He was number two in his graduating class.

At the time of the study, Nick was a 21 year old young man attending a traditional four year university. He is attending college on a full academic scholarship. He is concurrently pursuing a bachelor and master degree in engineering with a minor in mathematics. He is single with no children.

**Kayser.** Kayser was born and raised in the area where the study took place. He lived with his mom and step-father who have been married for years. His mom has a college degree and step-father has a high school diploma. Overall life at home was very stable with a routine. There were daily chores, weekly attendance at church, and a warm foundation which he felt was critical to his success. Although he has a brother and three sisters, the only children in the house were Kayser and his twin. His dad lived in another

state and was not in the picture much. Although his step-father is a good father figure, the long distance that separated Kayser from his biological father was very painful at times. They have since rekindled their relationship and it is a good one.

Kayser attended elementary, middle, and high school in the same school system. He took all honors classes in middle school. He participated in the system's early college program once he entered high school and graduated with a high school diploma and an associate degree. The early college program was partnered with various four year institutions which enabled Kayser to earn an academic scholarship to a state HBCU. Upon graduation from college, he received a Bachelor of Science in Accounting degree. He eventually earned a Master of Accounting degree from a traditional university and is preparing to take the CPA exam.

At the time of the study, Kayser was 27 years old. He is single with no children. He recently moved from one big city to another big city and is working as an accountant.

**Isaiah.** Isaiah was born and raised in the area where the study took place. Although his dad was very active in his life, he was mainly raised by his aunt because his mom was not around while he was growing up. His sister and paternal grandparents also lived in the household. His aunt has a college degree and his dad graduated from high school.

Overall life at home was not very structured as far as routines and chores. He was expected to clean up after himself. While he was at home a lot, Isaiah was not allowed to play with the neighborhood kids. His main focus in life was pursuing an education, learning life skills, and attending church. His dad had been sick for about ten years and passed away a few months before Isaiah graduated from high school. He didn't start

focusing on school and take it seriously until after his dad got sick. Isaiah stated the he “had to start growing up” earlier than his peers because “I had to help my family take care of my dad.” He “took on a caretaker role early.”

Isaiah attended elementary, middle, and high school in the same system where the study took place. He attended the early college program until the program ended due to lack of funding. He graduated first in his class with an advanced diploma and some college credit.

At the time of the study, Isaiah was 20 years old. He is attending a traditional four year university where he is majoring in accounting. He is attending college on a partial scholarship and is receiving other forms of financial aid. He works two jobs which he says are to “maintain my lifestyle.” He is single with no children.

**Tommy H.** Tommy was born and raised in the area where the study took place. He was raised by his mom. His dad was not in the picture. His dad dropped out of school at a young age. His mom started her senior year but never received her diploma.

Growing up life was really tough. His dad never came to see him. My mom had “a dream for me but I had my own dream.” He wanted to be doctor so that he could help people, but his mom was a singer and wanted him to be a singer. Everything that was in her was “kinda forced on me and I felt I had to make her happy”. Tommy was molested by a relative for a brief time which added to his distress because “I am trying to balance real life situation and still make my mother happy” because he felt forced to still live out “my mother’s dream for me.” His mom did not know that the molestation was going on so he was dealing with it by himself which caused him to become rebellious.

At the age of eight his dad came “to get me for the first time.” After several visits, his dad eventually “became abusive towards me and was hurtful with his words and actions.” Tommy never experienced the fun things that were supposed to be enjoyable in the life of a child. As a teen, things started to change because “my balance became unbalanced.”

Tommy attended elementary, middle, and high school in the same area. Life at school was pretty good until fifth grade. He failed the fifth grade which caused him to “feel bad about myself and that I was worthless.” He felt that he was leading a double life. It became where “I was angry and dished it out.” He failed every class in 8th grade and as a result, he was sent to the alternative school. When he transferred to the high school, “everything fell back on me and I didn’t know how to deal with it.” In 9th and 10th grade, he got into a fight and was suspended. Eventually, he started back singing which encouraged him to get back on the right track because his music talked about “everything I went through.” As a result of the changes, he was asked to come and sing at the alternative school. Instead of just singing a song, he wrote a production and performed it. In the end, he graduated with a high school diploma.

Tommy was 25 years old at the time of the study. He is working as a singer and performer. He has his own record label so that he can help other aspiring artists achieve their dreams. He has traveled and performed in various places in the United States, the United Kingdom and Africa. He is scheduled to perform in Asia. He has also performed for various dignitaries, such as mayors, governors, and the President. He has decided to write a book about his life and the obstacles he has overcome in an effort to inspire others. He is engaged to be married.

**Andre.** Andre is a native of the area where the study took place. He mainly grew up in a single parent home where he was raised by his mother. His dad was a constant in his life until he was four then after that he would see his dad once in while growing up. He has had no contact with him as an adult. He is the middle child of four boys. Although the family experienced financial struggles at times, Andre’s mom worked and “kept all of her children clothed, fed, and in a clean stable home.”

Andre attended elementary, middle, and high school in the same area. He had the opportunity to go to early college but he chose not to participate. Instead he followed a career technical program at the high school. He graduated with an advanced high school diploma. After, graduation, he attended a state university then transferred to a private university. Both were traditional universities. He completed a degree in business administration with a focus in information technology.

At the time of the study Andre was 25 years old, working as an IT Professional for a multi-billion-dollar IT Consulting Firm. He also participates in community outreach and research for a federally funded state university research Center where the focus is to advocate health education in low-income communities. He is single with no children.

**Niklaus.** Niklaus was born in another state and lived there for a few years before moving to this area. He is an only child from a single-parent home. Because his mom worked outside of the home, he lived alternately between her house and his aunt’s house. Once he was old enough, he pretty much watched himself because he would be left home alone. There was no stability and no real routine at home. He would stay up all night and be late to school or not go to school and just stay home. Regardless, he always made sure his work was completed and showed up to band practice. He did not have much of a

relationship with Dad because his dad spent most of his time in jail. When his dad was out of jail, his dad would come around when “it was convenient for him.” NiKlaus stated that all of the moving back and forth “messed with my life and it still affects me as an adult. I don’t like to get close to people as a result.”

Because of his birth date, NiKlaus started school earlier compared to his peers. When he transferred to the area, there was an attempt for him to be retained a grade. He moved around a lot during elementary school and did not start to experience any stability until he reached middle and high school where he remained in the area.

NiKlaus was 25 years old at the time of the study. He is single with no children. He graduated from an HBCU with a Bachelor of Music degree. He is enrolled in a fifth year program so that he can earn a master’s degree in education. He is also employed as a high school band director.

**Michael.** Michael was born in another state and later moved to the area. He was born to parents who were much older compared to the age of his peers’ parents. He lived in a two parent home and was the next to the youngest of seven children. His mother had a college degree and his dad had a high school diploma. Both parents worked outside of the home. Life at home was composed of a strict environment with very controlling parents He didn’t really have friends outside of school. His parents wanted him to go to college but he chose to enlist in the military instead. His reason for joining the military was “to see the world and interact with other people.” He wanted to see “the bigger picture because there is much more to the world and life than just where I am living.” Both parents supported his decision in the end.

Michael started school late because of his birth date. He attended school out of state until the beginning of the fifth grade but completed the rest of his education in this area. He took honors classes in middle school and participated in the high school's early college program for his first two years of high school. While he graduated with a high school diploma, he did not obtain an associate degree because he lacked a few credits.

At the time of the study, Michael was 29 years old and still in the military. He has served for two enlistments but will not re-enlist when this term is over. He is an E-5, non-commissioned officer who is a linguist for three languages and a cook. He is single with no children.

**Antonio.** Antonio was born in another state and lived in foster care for a few years until he was taken in and raised by his grandparents for the remainder of his childhood. Life at home had its ups and downs. Overall, life at home was not bad because it "made me who I am today." He is the middle of eight children but only he and two sisters lived with his grandparents.

Even though he was born out of state, Antonio attended elementary, middle, and high school in the area. Although he failed a grade in middle school, he was part of the early college program and graduated with a high school diploma and an associate degree.

At the time of the study, Antonio was 24 years old and working in management for a Fortune 500 company. He is also taking some college courses on the side so that he can learn additional trades. He is married but has no children.

**George.** George was born in another area and moved here right before he started kindergarten. He lived with his great-grandmother, his mom, and three brothers. His dad lived in another state, but he had no contact with his dad who was constantly in jail. His



great grandmother was a former schoolteacher so he was doing school work before he was in school. Home life in an extended household was structured with a schedule, three meals a day, work in the garden, and other constructive activities.

He attended elementary, middle, and high school in the area. He was not a part of early college because he had planned to go to high school in another state, but it did not work out. He was an AB student. He graduated with a high school diploma with an advanced endorsement.

At the time of the study, George was 26 years old. He has worked for a telecommunications company for four years. He was recently promoted to a supervisor within the firm. He is engaged and has one child.

## **Findings**

During the interviews, the following three emergent themes were identified: 1) the meaning of academic success, 2) the role of the stakeholders, and 3) a boy's only club. These themes are discussed separately in detail below.

**The meaning of academic success.** Academic success is associated with the willingness and desire to achieve academically. While the participants agreed with this statement, most also believed that academic success is about setting goals and achieving those goals through their own personal journey of pursuing excellence. Kayser stated that academic success is usually set at an earlier age where everyone wants to “become a doctor or a lawyer” and while that is fine, not everyone will eventually enter those fields. He believes that there are “so many other career opportunities that will allow us to create and afford us the quality of life we want.” Isaiah agreed by stating “that academic success determines how your quality of life will be after graduation.”

Isaiah, Tommy, and George added that academic success is about learning and retaining information so that it can be applied to life skills as you get older. Isaiah and Tommy also added “academic success should be about your own standards” and not just “the standards that society may set for you.”

Most of the participants believe academic success has helped them reach their future goals. It is important to set short-term goals helps to achieve long-term goals because as Isaiah stated, “academics teach life skills in addition to book knowledge” to “better present your academic skills and apply them to the workforce.” Kayser added, “academic success is the foundation to my overall success in life because opportunities would be limited without it.” In addition, Andre stated, “academic success helped me become more focused on being a life-long learner.”

**The role of stakeholders and education as the key to a better life.** The role of the family, principals, teachers, and peers played in the participant’s academic success were examined in this study. All stakeholders played a pivotal role in a child’s education.

**The family.** Parents and family played a pivotal role and in most cases, graduating from high school and going to college were expected in the household. Isaiah stated, “solutions should start with the parent” because many things they allow and nurture in their child’s education at a young age “will impact how the child will view education.” Parents should also continue to be “actively involved” in their child’s education through high school graduation.

**The principal.** Due to the high turnover of principals at the high school, the role of the principal was viewed mainly as the school’s manager of day-to-day activities or a figurehead. While the principal did stop and ask them their names or what their future

plans were, the principal was mainly viewed as the disciplinarian who was worried more “about the dress code than academics.” Most of them felt that the principal could have shown more active involvement in the academic process regardless of their tenure at the high school. Tommy said, “principals could also have been more caring towards me and my peers.” Nick and Kayer also stated, “the principal could have made sure that more innovative programs were created to reach all students” and that more core and elective classes could have been offered towards helping with college prep and overall academic success.

***The classroom teacher.*** As Nick and Isaiah pointed out, “teachers were the biggest part of our education.” All of the participants agreed that there were “some good teachers” and “some bad teachers.” The teachers that were labeled as “good teachers” were encouraging, supportive, encouraging, and made learning fun. They went above and beyond by “helping me understand when I was confused,” extending deadlines, and staying after school.

Teachers-student rapport is important because they want their teachers to get to know them as people so that relationships can be built. These same teachers can also “provide the mentorship we need.” Nick went on to say, “teachers need to embrace the Black male student more “because most of the time when they are “acting out” it is a “scream for help” and they are “looking for a way to get your attention” because teachers may not “know what is going on at home.” They also did not like it when the teacher was absent especially for a meeting because the “essence of what goes on daily was missing” and having a substitute “made us feel like we were teaching ourselves.”

***The peers.*** Peers played an important role in academic success because they usually have the most influence. Most peers were encouraging and positive. Isaiah said, I felt that my peers looked up to me and encouraged me to do well. George, Nick, and Kayser stated that they pushed each other to do well. Antonio and Andre hung with those peers who had the same mindset and goals which caused their peer base to be smaller than the others.

***The community.*** In spite of the poverty, gangs, and crime, most of the participants experienced positive support from the community. According to Isaiah, there was not much in the way of entertainment so education should have been “the focal point of life.” Even growing up in the projects, George was called a “bookworm” by gang members who hung out on the streets because he was always seen carrying a load of school and library books. Instead of it being a bad thing, the gang members were actually encouraging and told him to keep up the good work and stay off of the streets.

***A boy’s only club.*** The want and need for positive Black male role models was prominent during all of the interviews. Isaiah pointed out, “a lot of Black kids are raised by single moms and may not get enough exposure to enough Black males which is creating a mindset in young Black males that only Black females can be successful which leads Black males to believe that they cannot be successful.” They also “start believing that Black girls are smarter than they are.”

Nick talked about the need for more social clubs with activities that “bring the boys closer together” because boys are “sometimes envied by other boys or feel threatened by them” that they need to be brought together to “overcome those obstacles.”

The participants also felt like Black boys need to be exposed to successful Black men so they can see positive role models who look like them. A major challenge for these young men while in high school was not having enough positive male role models in their life.

### **Summary**

This chapter provided the findings and themes mined from the interviews of the nine participants of the study. The interviews explored the participants' experiences and perceptions of academic success in terms of grit and resiliency. The findings indicated that while many factors may affect resiliency, a person has to keep going until achieving success becomes a habit. Through analysis, it was determined that stability in high school and not having enough positive, successful males role models are all a part of the challenges of these young men. Fostering resiliency and grit internally are part of the strengths of these young men. Chapter 5 will provide an interpretation of these findings and recommendations based on these findings.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

In this chapter, the researcher reports on the relevance of the study, discussion of the findings and conclusions to the findings as described in Chapter 4. It also describes the relationship of these findings to previous literature to provide a broader meaning and understanding of the phenomena. Lastly, this chapter provides recommendations for future studies.

### Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the phenomenon of resilience and grit of Black young men from a city that is faced with high poverty, murder, incarceration, high unemployment, and many other factors. The young men came from various areas of the city and with diverse backgrounds. Using a phenomenological qualitative research methodology, nine Black men who attended the local high school, graduated, and successfully entered the workforce, enrolled in college, graduated from college and gained employment in their field of study, or served in the military. Interviews with open-ended questions ascertained these men's views with regard to resilience and grit and the reasons for their own personal resilience, grit, and success. This study provided a direct account of the experiences and factors perceived as related to the success of Black men in an area plagued with violence, gangs, poverty, and incarceration which, as a result, revealed the perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and understanding with regard to the phenomenon under investigation. These young men also provided some ideal solutions.

The study was designed to answer the following central questions: What does hope and success mean and look like to the Black male in the Black Belt Region?

The sub-questions that assisted in the research were:

1. What are the differences that motivated these Black males to decide that school and education were important and the key to a better life than the one in which they were living?
2. What themes of academic success by Black males appear to emerge from their encounters within the high school setting?
3. What caused these impoverished young Black males to construct meaning about their feelings and experiences towards a better life?
4. What are some challenges and solutions for achieving academic success through resiliency?

### **Discussion of Research Findings**

**Supporting Question 1.** What are the differences that motivated these Black males to decide that school and education were important and the key to a better life than the one in which they were living? The results of this study indicated that the perceptions of academic success from a sense of the value and importance of education is a means to overcoming negative experiences and improve the quality of life. Academic success is about setting goals and achieving those goals through their own experiences. Students who understand that working hard while in school will lead to greater future opportunities (Noguera, 2008).

In addition, the importance and relevance lies in the fact that these young men realize that resiliency and grit is external and that they are ultimately responsible for their own success. Resiliency is a means to bounce back after overcoming negative obstacles and experiences and to improve their quality of life (Hooper, 2009). Grit is the continued

determination to keep going once the excitement of reaching a goal is no longer new (McCarty, 2014). Knowing and understanding the way and life and experience of people of African American decent is important so that educators can better understand the Black male students they serve (Asante, 1990). Regardless of backgrounds and family structure, the attitudes and perceptions of academic success were similar among all of the participants. Even though each of these young men had different future goals, graduating with a high school diploma was the first step in making that plan a reality. In addition, the importance and relevance lies in the fact that these young men realize that resiliency and grit is external and that they are ultimately responsible for this own success.

**Supporting Question 2.** What themes of academic success by Black males appear to emerge from their encounters within the high school setting? All stakeholders of these young men need to know how young Black males perceive academic success and how to be the support system that they need.

This research will allow educators and the community to examine highlighted issues and consider becoming more proactive, instead of reactive. While the reports and accounts of these young Black men are supported by research, it is clear that they are still facing issues in the educational arena. However, prevalent issues faced by young Black males are not necessarily the same issues of all males. While some research shows that some Black males are successful, it is important for schools to help Black boys by providing high quality instruction while acknowledging the challenges that Black boys face in the community and at school (Barbarin, 2010).

Barbain (2010) stated that parents and families are a child's first teachers so it should not come as a surprise that the majority of the participants stated that parental and



family involvement played a big role in their educational journey. Parental involvement is just one factor that contributes to the academic success of students who attend public school. It is also important that parents remain involved throughout high school in their child's educational journey (Epstein, 1993; Epstein, 2008). Regardless of the type of household in which they grew up, it was an expectation, not an option, that graduating with a high school diploma was a requirement in order to achieve a better quality of life.

In spite of the principal turnover, most participants felt that the principal could have been more than just a figurehead whose main concern was discipline. While discipline is important, the principal has the authority to change the curriculum so it can enhance the Black boy's educational experience.

Even though peers can be a positive or negative influence, the findings showed peers played a big role in their educational background. Most participants associated with peers of the same mind-set as themselves so there was more encouragement to do better in an effort to be successful.

**Supporting Question 3.** What caused these impoverished young Black males to construct meaning about their feelings and experiences towards a better life? Since a high school diploma is the critical entry point for employment or higher education, it is essential to provide young boys with the opportunity to graduate and receive a high school diploma while preparing them to attend college, the military, or workforce. (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012; Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015). Most boys realize that a high school diploma is important but have little idea on how to make that dream a reality because they are the least successful to teach by

traditional methods (Connell, 1994). Black males need to discover their own ideas of what academic success means so that they can construct their success and destiny.

According to Kunjufu (2005), the greatest and fastest influence of young Black boys is the streets. Noguera (2008) noted that Black boys do not need to be trapped in a stereotype of what society thinks it means to be a Black adolescent male. While many Black males are confronted with a variety of issues daily, such as risks, obstacles, and social pressures, most can navigate through them successfully (Noguera, 2008). All of the participants stated that they had no desire to associate in the happenings in the streets even when they got older and had more freedom. Unlike their peers who may have had vague or no goals, they had a clear goal and understood that education was important to future success. It is important to understand the factors that enable Black boys to resist the pressures from the street and respond positively to those stakeholders who want to help our Black boys (Noguera, 2008).

**Supporting Question 4.** What are some challenges and solutions for achieving academic success through resiliency? The high turnover of teachers and administrators presented a challenge because the inconsistency hindered their academic success. The fact that they did not have as many Black male teachers played a role because some participants did not grow up with many, if any, positive male role models. Milner (2006) stated that for deeper learning to occur, there is a need to hire more Black teachers because it is essential for the Black teachers to serve as positive role models. This exposure helps Black kids to decide on future professions and visualize their possibilities in life. Kunjufu (2005) stated that Black boys need exposure to more positive adults

particularly Black male role models. There is also a need for the exposure to Black male teachers so they can interact with successful males who look like them.

### **Limitations**

This study had a few anticipated limitations. Since the participants are the researcher's former students, teacher/student rapport may impact this study. The participants of the study were restricted to the experiences of Black male students only. The influence of the researcher's life experiences may influence the interpretation of the data. The researcher's presence may cause biased responses from the participants. Participants of this study may not have been equally articulate and perceptive. Because this study utilized a small sample, the research findings may not easily generalize to other Black male students from different environments, such as suburban or urban. Further studies in other environments may confirm or contradict the findings of this study.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

This study provided useful information about the perceptions of resilience and grit and the factors that affect academic success for the Black male student from a high poverty, high crime area.

The first recommendation for the future would be a study of Black males in other areas of the Black Belt Region to determine if perceptions of academic success mean the same to Black males in the whole region. Other studies regarding the academic success, resiliency, and grit of Black males in other geographic areas of the state or country where there is a more diverse group of people living in the community would be recommended.

A second recommendation includes more in depth training and professional development for educators that are geared towards the needs of the Black male student,

such as instructional strategies that engage and motivate the Black boy, should be considered if we truly intend to reach these young men.

A third recommendation is to conduct future studies which include unsuccessful Black males in the area to determine if there is a difference between perceptions of academic success between successful Black boys and unsuccessful Black boys. This could help determine why boys are more likely to drop out and not graduate which in turn can lead to crime and incarceration.

A fourth recommendation includes a future study involving individuals not connected to the researcher in order to gain a more objective perspective regarding the perceptions of academic success.

Lastly, there is a recommendation for the community to create programs that cater solely to the needs and wants of young Black males. Most males do not grow up with a father figure in the home. Male leaders in the community can create a greater interaction by being the successful positive male role model that young Black men need.

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## Appendix A

### Recruitment Statement for Research Participation

### Recruitment Statement for Research Participation

I am Lisa M. Morenzeni and I attend Nova Southeastern University. I am currently working on my Doctor of Education degree. I am in the process of writing my dissertation and I would like to invite you to participate in my study. The title of my study is *The Black Male's Perspective of Academic Success in the Black Belt Region*. The purpose of this study is to explore and discover factors that influence student achievement of Black males who graduated from your high school which is in an impoverished community affected by violence, gang activity, incarceration, single-parent homes, drop-outs, death, and more. This study will explore and describe how you feel about your life. You will describe in your own words how you perceive and view academic success and how you were enabled to graduate and successfully enter the workforce, the military, or college.

To participate in this study, you will need a signed consent form. You will be expected to participate in two interviews and to enter information in a running journal. Each interview will last approximately an hour long and you will be asked to record at least once in the journal. During the interview, you will be asked questions about your school and home life while attending high school and be asked to share why you felt that it was necessary to complete your education so that you could successfully enter college, the military, or the workplace upon graduation.

Please be aware that your participation in this or any research study is completely voluntary. You have 24 hours to decide if you wish to participate in this study. There will be no consequences to you whatever if you choose not to participate. I will contact you once the 24 hour period has passed to ask you if you will be a participant in this research study. Once you agree, a copy of the consent form will be sent to you electronically for you to sign and return back to me electronically. You will have 24 hours to return a signed consent form.

## Appendix B

### Semi-Structured Interview Questions

### Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. How would you define academic success?
3. How do you feel that academic success has helped you with your future goals?
4. Describe your academic performance while in school.
5. What academic challenges did you experience while in school?
6. Were there any particular study skills or strategies that you used to help with your academic performance?
7. Describe your social life while in school.
8. What goals did you set for yourself while in school?
9. Did you achieve those goals? Did your goals change once you graduated? Explain.
10. Explain the role your parents played in your education.
11. Explain the role the principal played in your education.
12. What do you think the principal could have done to help you realize your academic ability?
13. Explain the role your teachers played in your education.
14. What do you think the teachers could have done to help you realize your academic ability?
15. What effect did the school environment have on your academic ability as a Black male student?
16. How do you feel the school could have addressed your needs better?
17. What effect did the community have on your academic success as a Black male student?
18. How could the community have addressed your needs better?
19. What role did your friends and peers play in your academic success?
20. Discuss any other factors that you feel would have contributed academic success for Black male students.
21. What may hinder Black male students from achieving academic success?
22. What solutions do you have for Black male students to become successful in academics?
23. Explain how prepared you were for life after high school.

Additional questions for those young men currently enrolled in post-secondary education or who have graduated with a degree:

1. Describe your college experience.
2. Do/Did you have priorities outside of school? If so, what are they?
3. Do/Did these priorities make it challenging to continue your education?
4. How encouraging is/was your family of you pursuing a college degree?
5. Do/Did you feel your college experience is/was different based on your gender? How?
6. Do/Did you feel your college experience is/was different based on your race? How?
7. Do/Did you feel that people are/were supportive of you completing your degree?



8. Do/Did you ask questions during class? If not, do/did you make an appointment to see the professor after class?
9. How different are your college friends compared to your friends who are not in college?

Additional questions for those young men who entered the workforce:

1. Explain the type of work that you are doing in the workforce.
2. How long have you been employed in the work force?
3. Were you able to find a job right away after graduating? If not, how long did it take you to become employed?
4. What made you decide to go straight to work as opposed to going to a post-secondary institution and furthering your education?
5. Do you feel you made the right choice by going straight into the workforce? Why or why not?
6. How does your family support your choice to work and not further your education?
7. Have you received any criticism from others about your choice to work and not further your education?

Additional questions for those young men who entered the military:

1. What branch of the military do you serve in?
2. How long have you served in the military?
3. What made you decide that the military was the best choice for you as opposed to entering the workforce or pursuing higher education?
4. Do you plan to go to college with the funds made available by the military? What will your major be?

Appendix C  
Interview Demographic Descriptors

Table 1 *Interview Demographic Descriptors*

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	In College	College Graduate	Workforce	Military
Andre	25	Male	Black		X	X	
Antonio	24	Male	Black			X	
George	26	Male	Black			X	
Isaiah	20	Male	Black	X		X	
Kayser	27	Male	Black		X	X	
Michael	29	Male	Black				X
Nick	21	Male	Black	X			
NiKlaus	25	Male	Black		X	X	
Tommy H.	25	Male	Black			X	