

ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OF BLACK MALES IN A RURAL MIDDLE SCHOOL

by

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Dedication

I thank God for the strength to persevere and endure this process and my husband who labored and prayed with me along this journey. I dedicate this dissertation to my late Uncle Alonzo who spoke the word "doctor" into my life and my parents for their love and prayers. I thank my family and my Grandma for their support and Rita, who believed in me. I thank everyone who encouraged me. We finally made it!

Acknowledgments

The idea for this study originated from discussions with my school staff about the stark academic and behavioral differences among Black males in my school who were alike in many other ways. The Black male students in the school have similarities in lifestyle, economic status, and family structure, yet their school performance indicates differences that are as diverse as the opposite ends of a spectrum. This dissertation is a quest to understand the differences that lead to the high academic achievement of some Black male students in my school.

Several people have been helpful to me along this journey. To Dr. Francis Godwyll who regenerated my energies to complete this process, your patience and assistance made all the difference. To my chairperson, Dr. Malisa, and committee members, Dr. Mensah and Dr. Owusu-Daaku, I appreciate your eyes and voices. To my former chair, Dr. Joyce Nichols, thank you for giving me a start. To Dr. Mark Malisa, though you joined my committee at the end of my writing, your contribution and support have have been enormous; I owe you gratitude for completion of this phase and for directing me to a wealth of resources I would have never thought to use.

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Abstract

Educational statistics have consistently recorded low academic performance for Black male students, particularly those in high-poverty settings. Research studies have documented that very few Black male students can perform at the level of their counterparts from other racial categories. Circumstances such as poverty, deprivation, and lack of mentorship affect Black males' academic achievement and underachievement. The purpose of this qualitative interpretive study was to explore the lived experiences of select Black male students who have been academically successful at a high-poverty rural middle school in the Southern United States. I used, per Bandura's (1977) social cognitive theory (SCT), the framework of the study, human learning and development occur through personal experiences and examination of the actions of others. I explored how behavioral, personal, and environmental factors interact to affect the self-efficacy of 12 Black male students in the school setting. Findings revealed participants perceived positive family support, positive friend or peer network, positive teacher influence, and positive self-image as supportive factors that contributed to their academic success. This study shifts the focus from Black male deficiencies to emphasizing their achievements and how internal factors such as self-perception, attitude, and self-confidence outweigh external factors such as low socioeconomic factors and lack of mentors that could reduce opportunities for success. Study participants' desires for academic achievement created a transformative bridge between their self-efficacious beliefs and their drive for education. Future research should continue to focus on understanding the contributing factors to young Black males' school success and giving them positive voices.

Chapter 1: Introduction

In his *My Brother's Keeper* speech at the White House in 2014, former President Barack Obama called the stagnation and lack of opportunity for the Black male a national challenge, stating that 50 years after Dr. Martin Luther King's talk about a dream, the average Black or Brown child still lags in almost every educational measure (Obama, 2014). President Obama stated that although Black males have the intelligence to attain extraordinary achievement, the odds have been stacked against them. According to President Obama, the nonexistence of a father or the deprivation of encouragement from family, along with other obstacles faced by a Black male student, can make him less likely than a White male student to read proficiently by the fourth grade. President Obama called for a nation of mentors who would actively engage and invest in helping young Black and Brown males grow into capable, responsible men, stating that instead of "cherry picking" those who would be successful without support, a wide net must be cast. President Obama concluded his speech by declaring that solving this problem would not happen overnight because building an infrastructure in this 21st-century economy requires time, effort, and rigorous, effective programs to produce results (Obama, 2014).

Former President Obama's comments about the educational future of Black males capture the situation some Black male students continue to face. His call to action points out how important it is to explore Black male students' experience within the nation's educational system to understand their opportunities for academic success. Furthermore, not only must the focus be on what can contribute to Black male students' success, but also it must be on what will increase their desire to be successful.

Despite the efforts of educational policies such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (2002) and the "Race to the Top" initiative, the academic gap between Black students and other

ethnic groups persists (Bell, 2014). According to the Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups 2017 report, the records of the highest math course credit in calculus showed that Black students were at the bottom of the achievement ladder at 6% compared to Asian students at 45%, White students at 18%, two or more races at 11%, and Hispanic students at 10% (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). Research studies have documented the variables that affect Black male students' academic achievement and underachievement: socioeconomic status, unfavorable social environment, deprived neighborhoods, mentor absence, and parental disengagement (Bell, 2014; Bowman et al., 2018; Ford, 2011; Kirp, 2011). These studies have found that these factors account for some Black males not graduating from high school and college and lagging behind other races and genders in reading and math (Bell, 2014; McFarland et al., 2016; Schott Foundation of Public Education, 2010).

As a group, Black male students refrain from taking the more challenging high school courses that would prepare them for post-secondary studies. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2017), Black male students who take pre-college courses account for a lower percentage than their peers from other races. Twelve percent of Black students take pre-calculus or calculus by 11th grade compared to 53% Asian students, 16% Hispanic students, and 24% multiracial students who take pre-calculus or calculus. According to the High School Longitudinal Survey of 2009, 33% White females, 27% White males, 22% Black females, and 15% Black males took honor classes (NCES, 2014). Enrollment of Black males in higher education remains at 4.5%, which is equivalent to what it was in 1976 (Scott et al., 2013).

While some Black male middle school students perform well academically, very little attention is focused on their achievements; instead, either society's focus is on those who fail to perform or on how far they lag behind their peers. These Black male students may sit in similar

classrooms, receive instruction from the same teachers, and experience the same classroom climate and school culture, but they leave the classroom with different academic outcomes than their peers (Cook, 2015). Academic disparities among students exist, and the educational gap among races is undeniable, particularly for Black males (Mitchell & Stewart, 2013; Morton, 2014; Pitre, 2014). The academic performance of Black males is, thus, a critical issue in American education that warrants research (Dulabaum, 2016; Mundy, 2014).

This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of select academically successful Black male students in a high-poverty rural middle school in the Southern United States. The actual name of the school used for this study is referenced by the pseudonym *Success Heights School*. This study employs an interpretive phenomenological approach framed within Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), an approach that enabled me to elicit the participants' insights concerning their academic achievement and a detailed account of their lived experiences. The data for the study is collected through observations and individual interviews with 12 Black male students in the middle school who had a grade point average (GPA) of 3.0 (80%) or higher. The significance of this research is in its contribution to the paucity of existing research on Black male students who attain academic success in middle school and the factors that enable these Black male students to reach academic success while learning in the same class with peers who are not as academically successful. This research study is significant also because of its potential to reveal to educational practitioners the factors within the educational environment that these students identify as supportive to their educational attainment. Finally, this research study can contribute information to the psyches of Black male students, addressing their struggles, which is relevant to creating effective educational policies for this student demographic.

Chapter 1 provides the background and contextualization for the study and is followed by the problem statement and purpose of the study. Presented thereafter is an overview of the theoretical framework, as well as the methodology that guided data collection. Next, I present the overarching research question and its theory-based sub-questions, followed by the study's assumptions, delimitations and limitations, and significance, as well as the definition of relevant terms used throughout the study. The chapter concludes with the organizational structure of the study and a summary of the major areas covered in the chapter.

Background and Contextualization of the Issue

During the early 1800s, many states in the United States made it illegal to educate Black children (Anderson, 2010; Morice & Hunt, 2007). Southern states legislated laws that made teaching enslaved children how to read and write a crime (Anderson, 2010). During this time, the plight of Black people included the struggle for social equality and freedom from the institution of slavery (Anderson, 2010). Slavery, besides being a physically oppressive practice, denied Black people any opportunity for schooling (Butchart, 2002; Morice & Hunt, 2007). The acquisition of literacy was restricted from slaves: "During the three decades before the Civil War, slaves lived in a society, in which for them, literacy was forbidden by law and symbolized as a skill that contradicted the status of slaves" (Anderson, 2010, p. 16). As an institution, slavery was the beginning of centuries of physical, mental, and educational oppression that continued for nearly 400 years (Anderson, 2010).

After slavery ended, African Americans received an inadequate education despite efforts in both the North and South by Black and White teachers as well as by churches and other organizations to provide the newly emancipated population with a universal public education (Anderson, 2010; Butchart, 2002). According to Collins and Margo (2006), "The long-term

process of convergence...[had] yet to fully run its course, and the remaining racial gaps in schooling have proven quite stubborn to eliminate” (Collins & Margo, 2006, p. 107). Thus, African Americans of all ages rushed to take advantage of the opportunity to gain literacy which was regarded as the key to freedom that would remove remaining barriers such as school segregation and exclusion from voting (Butchart, 2002). Anderson (2010) described this desperate desire to learn and the value of self-determination as what led to the educational movement, a time marked by efforts of self-education and a commitment to schooling for slaves and their children.

People anticipated a shift in the education of African Americans when President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 declaring freedom for 3 to 4 million slaves (Anderson, 2010; Ross, 2009). Prior to the proclamation, some Black people were committed to improving their education and living standards (Anderson, 2010). Provenzo et al. (2009) stated that literacy rates increased from 5% in 1865 to 70% by the 1900s. Despite the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, schools remained segregated and Caucasians did not want African Americans to become educated, fearing an educated Black populace would challenge White supremacy (Anderson, 2010; Carter & Welner, 2013). Black progress threatened what American Southerners called "place" (Anderson, 2010). African Americans were not allowed to receive a formal education until the Reconstruction period (Collins & Margo, 2006).

The Supreme Court lent support to continued inequality in education when it ruled in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that "separate but equal" facilities were constitutional (Moskowitz, 2018). The *Plessy v. Ferguson* case stemmed from a deliberate act of resistance in 1892 to the Louisiana Separate Car Act of 1890, which required separate seating for African Americans and

Caucasians on public transportation in Louisiana. This law and laws like it in other states—which came to be known as Jim Crow laws—made a legal distinction between the races (Strong et al., 2000). Plessy, the eventual claimant, believed the law violated the 13th Amendment, which abolished slavery and involuntary servitude, and the 14th Amendment, which addressed equal protection of the law. Plessy, a freedman of color who resembled a White man because of his Haitian and French heritage, bought a train ticket and, in a purposely chosen act of defiance aimed at striking down segregation laws, sat in a Whites-only car. When told to move, Plessy refused. However, when the Supreme Court finally heard the case in 1896, the Court cited the laws governing the Louisiana Separate Car Act of 1890 as "reasonable," thereby giving legal justification to segregation not only in public places like trains and buses but also in hotels, theaters, and schools (Strong et al., 2000). In other words, the Supreme Court, in accepting racial segregation as reasonable and legal, promulgated the discriminatory practices designed to keep African Americans positioned in a place of fear and inferiority; thus, Jim Crow laws continued (Klarman, 2006; Moskowitz, 2018). These laws, understood by racists as necessary and justifiable, upheld and promoted the continued segregation of African Americans and Caucasians through mandates for separate restrooms, separate schools, and separate building entrances, extending as far as a prohibition of interracial marriage (Tischauser, 2012).

The journey toward equality between races resulted from the Supreme Court's decision made in another profound case: *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (Henderson, 2004). This United States Supreme Court case was a milestone in the history of African Americans. The ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* overturned that of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (Klarman, 2006; Moskowitz, 2018). This landmark Supreme Court case was the first step toward desegregation following 400 years of slavery (Lutz, 2017). In 1950, Oliver Brown, plaintiff and

father of an 8-year-old daughter, Linda, challenged the policy of racial segregation that required his daughter to attend a segregated school twenty-one blocks away instead of the White neighborhood school that was just twelve blocks away. Brown, along with thirteen other families, sued the Topeka school district in 1951 (McGrane, 2004). The Browns were represented by Thurgood Marshall, an African American attorney and Chief Counsel for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Legal Defense and Education Fund. The case was ruled in favor of the Browns in 1954 when the court declared the segregation of public schools unconstitutional, thus overturning the initial “separate but equal” ruling from *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Even after this favorable verdict for the plaintiff, staunch opposition to integration from both African Americans and Caucasians still existed (Henfield, 2011; Lutz, 2017).

Though African Americans had been emancipated from slavery for nearly a century, and though in many locations African Americans exhibited a passion for education, they still struggled to acquire property, become gainfully employed, celebrate civil equalities, and ascend socially and academically (Palmer & Maramba, 2011). The opposite was true in Topeka, where *Brown v. Board of Education* was filed (Lutz, 2017). In Topeka, African Americans took advantage of education, and they were creating a promising living amongst members of their own race (Lutz, 2017).

From 1940 to 2007, the academic potential of Black male students in the United States showed upward trends and downward spirals (Toldson et al., 2009). In 1940, 6.7% of Black men in the United States graduated with a high school diploma, compared to 25% of White men. The largest gaps occurred in 1950 when graduation percentages of White males doubled that of Black males (Badger, 2014). In 2006, this trend continued. Black male students' high school graduation

rates dropped from 81.1% to 79.1%. At the close of the second half of the 20th century, improvements were evident when 80% of Black males over age 23 graduated from high school or received a General Education Diploma (GED). Furthermore, compared to White peers, graduation rates of African Americans were at least 10% lower in states that housed two thirds of the nation's Black students (Balfanz et al., 2014).

According to McGee and Pearman (2014), Black males across the nation overwhelmingly underachieve. In English courses, 42% of Black students scored at or above grade level, while 85% of White students scored at or above grade level. In Algebra II, 34% of African Americans scored at or above grade level, while 74% of Caucasians scored at or above grade level (Davis, 2017; Statistical Analysis System Institute [SAS], 2015). Per Skiba and Williams (2014), high discipline, suspension, and expulsion rates for Black students are an enduring trend, suggesting that the trend has continued for a period of 40 years. Black males continue to face challenges such as underachievement, educational regression, high dropout rates, high incidences of crime, and disproportionate representation in special education programs (McGee, 2013; McGee & Pearman, 2014; Yaffe, 2012). A recent data analysis revealed that disparities remain between Black and White males with high school suspensions. Black males are suspended at a rate of 18%, compared to 5% of White males (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2016). Balfanz et al. (2014) provided evidence that students who are suspended are less likely to graduate than their non-suspended peers. Suspensions contribute to the achievement gap between Black and White students (Davis, 2017). Continued absence from school is also of great concern and is a potential predictor of high school dropouts (Okilwa & Robert, 2017). Although the trend of dropouts has decreased in recent years, Black students fare worse on this predictor than White students (McFarland et al., 2017).

Furthermore, Pitre (2014) cited clear and distinctive discrepancies in academic performance between African Americans and other ethnic groups, using data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the largest nationally known assessment that identifies students' academic strengths and weaknesses in a variety of subjects across states and some urban districts. In 2013, 18% of fourth-grade Black students were proficient in reading, compared to 46% of their White counterparts. As students advanced to higher grades, the gap persisted. Similar results were seen in eighth grade. Black students were 12% lower in reading proficiency, compared to White peers' 29% proficiency (Pitre, 2014). A similar trend existed throughout high school. During Black students' last year of school, 16% proved proficient in reading, but White students performed 31% higher. In 2013, reading data showed 44% of 12th grade Black students were "below basic" (lower than grade-level proficiency) as compared to 17% of White students. The gap in mathematics was more pronounced. In 2013, 82% of Black fourth-grade students placed below basic in math, while their grade-equivalent White peers placed 46% in the below basic category. Even with eighth-grade Black students, the same gap occurred in which 86% placed below basic, and 55% of their White peers placed below basic. The percentage of Black students in the 12th grade who were below basic in mathematics was 93%, compared to 67% of White students (Pitre, 2014).

Several factors have limited academic achievement of Black males. These factors include poverty, social environment, deprived neighborhoods, mentor absence, parental disengagement, and socioeconomic status (Ford, 2011; Kirp, 2011). As the subject of academic achievement is unpacked, an investigation of the intersection of teachers' roles within the context of Black males' academic achievement becomes an integral part of the discussion.

One challenge to Black male students' academic achievement is the classroom teacher who lowers expectations for student learning because of feelings of pity for the students' life challenges (Rojas & Liou, 2017). According to Rojas and Liou (2017), this perception of pity, derived from a feeling of sympathy for Black students' collective economic circumstances, leads to the conviction that it is justifiable for such students to be exempt from a rigorous education. Teachers' reduced expectations negatively affect Black students, as students internalize the concept of pity and the idea that academic achievement is an option that is not reachable because of their disadvantage (Rojas & Liou, 2017). Such perceived thoughts can destabilize actual aptitude to learn. Because of such deficit perspectives, the teachers sometimes lower their expectations of Black students in the classroom (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968).

Many public-school populations reflect residential segregation, which is quite problematic to Black male students' achievement (Badger, 2014). The correlation between the wealth of a community and the state of schools in the community exists because schools are partially funded through local land taxes (Badger, 2014; Carter & Welner, 2013). Generally, the value of property of White Americans exceeds that of African Americans, and this disparity in the value of property is reflected in the property tax collected. When property value is high, tax revenue is high. As a result, schools populated with Black students are doomed to the poorest facilities, leadership, and instruction, more so than schools populated primarily with White students (Badger, 2014). Thus, property tax revenue also contributes to the growing achievement gap between the wealthiest and poorest schools (Carter & Welner, 2013; Rothstein, 2015).

Separation in schools as a result of racial diversity prevents students from receiving the best education (Baker et al., 2016; Henfield, 2011). Racial composition and the degree of minority concentration in schools have an influence on student academic achievement

(Cunningham et al., 2009; Rowley & Wright, 2011). Badger (2014) noted that segregation based on race is more prevalent among school-aged children than among adults. This segregation is a result of students being relegated to attending the schools in their neighborhoods, and, with the existing economic disparity between Black and White neighborhoods, Black students are relegated to attending schools that are not as equipped as White schools, thus contributing to the achievement gap between Black and White students (Baker et al., 2016). Segregation by race undercuts the goals of integration, social mobility, and social cohesion (Baker et al., 2016).

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service (2020), rural counties experience lower levels of educational attainment than other areas. Rural counties comprise approximately four-fifths of the 316 counties in the United States. Of these rural counties, 208 are in the Southern United States and are often ethnically, economically, and racially distinctive (USDA-ERS, 2020). The USDA-ERS (2020) reported that African Americans make up 20% or more of the population in 185 of the 316 counties in the United States. Moreover, 156 of these rural counties experience high poverty of 20%, and 116 of these counties have a manufacturing or farming economy (USDA-ERS, 2020).

The site selected for this study, Success Heights School, is located in one of the rural counties in the Southern United States; it is a middle school where a large number of students are from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Success Heights School is a prime example of a Title I school, schools that are federally funded to help students from deprived economic backgrounds to achieve their educational goals (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Success Heights School is located in Southern Alabama, with a population of 3,783 at the time of the study, a decrease of 14% from 2014 to 2015. The ethnic makeup of the county at the time of the study was 64.1% Caucasian, 31.3% African American, 1.1% Hispanic or Latino, 3.1% American Indian and

Native American, and 0.3% Asian. The median household income for residents living within the city limits was \$17,700, which represents a 5.15% decline from 2015 to 2016. The median property value was \$78,500. In 2015, 160 citizens graduated from the local technical college. Many of the graduates were Caucasian.

Success Heights School is also a magnet school that provides competitive educational opportunities to high-poverty students from different school districts. Success Heights School is the first magnet school with a fully integrated STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics) curriculum in its home state. The school serves students in Grades 6–9, whom the school supports with an academic climate consisting of interest-based enrichment programs such as piano, choir, technology, and foreign language. Students are offered free tutoring opportunities as well. Together, the student and scholastic organizations improve the quality of school life and give students an opportunity to participate in several educational opportunities.

Success Heights School serves 103 students, a relatively small student enrollment with the student demographics being 86.7% African American, 14.1% Caucasian, and 0.009% Korean. The average student-to-teacher class ratio is 15:1. The Success Heights School staff consists of 15 employees, approximately 38% Caucasian and 62% African American, and is led by a Black female principal with 16 years of administrative experience and 24 total years of experience in public education. The principal's highest educational qualification is that of education specialist. All teachers teach in their field of certification. Other staff include a part-time media specialist, a part-time special education teacher, a physical education teacher, a custodian, and two support personnel who teach arts.

Success Heights School was selected as the site for the study because of the following reasons. Success Heights School is a Title I magnet school that caters to students of all

socioeconomic statuses, especially those from low socioeconomic backgrounds who are the target population for the study. Success Heights is appropriate for this study because it requires all students to meet specific academic and behavioral qualifications such as maintaining a B average and receiving fewer than three disciplinary referrals. These high academic and behavioral requirements of students ensured a pool of potential participants who could answer the study's research questions about the environmental, behavioral, and personal factors responsible for their academic successes.

Problem Statement

Across the United States, Black male students underachieve academically (Mitchell & Stewart, 2013). Research specifically identifies the academic gaps between Black and White students in areas such as reading and math (Atwell et al., 2019; Carter & Welner, 2013; Pitre, 2014). This achievement gap has existed since the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and is a result of socioeconomic and racial disparities that impact the school quality and educational opportunities available to Black and White students (Darling-Hammond, 2014; Kevelson, 2019; Legal Information Institute, n.d.). As of Fall 2017, Black students constituted only 7.7 million of the 50.7 million students in public elementary and secondary schools. Furthermore, only 7% of these Black students, compared to their Asian and White counterparts who constituted 39% and 31%, respectively, were enrolled in low-poverty schools. The statistics show that Black students are largely represented in high-poverty schools, at 45% of the population in those schools, compared to White students who constitute only 8% (Cai, 2020). This achievement gap ranks Black male students at the bottom of the achievement ladder in reading and math when compared to Black females, White females, and White males (Atwell et al., 2019; McFarland et al., 2016; Pitre, 2014). White students' average reading and math scores

were in the 55th percentile, while Black students' test scores were in the 28th percentile (Rowley & Wright, 2011), and an examination of the National Report Card from 1992–2019 shows Black students in fourth, eighth, and 12th grades as consistently recording lower reading and math scores than White students (Cai, 2020). Furthermore, the 2017 graduation rate for Black students was 77.8%, which is below the national average of 84.6% (Atwell et al., 2019). These statistics show that Black male students are at a disadvantage economically, socially, and academically (Atwell et al., 2019; Casserly et al., 2012), thus making the underachievement of African Americans a phenomenon of great interest in education.

Academic disparities create a context that substantiates the need to explore factors that aid in academic achievement. Kafele (2012) observed that while Black male students' academic problems often begin before they enter school, these students continue to lose track of the significance of attaining an education over time. Both external and internal factors contribute to Black students' academic achievement; equally, specific factors contribute to their lack of academic achievement (McGee & Pearman, 2015). Internal factors have lasting impacts on academic performance. These factors include self-perception, expectations, motivation, ambition, anxiety, self-confidence, and attitude toward school (McGee & Pearman, 2015). External factors make it difficult for students to achieve success. These external factors include low socioeconomic backgrounds and reduced opportunities (Neal & Rick, 2014). Research shows a strong correlation between external factors, such as socioeconomic status and achievement (Bell, 2014; Bowman et al., 2018; Ford, 2011; Kirp, 2011). These studies reported that low socioeconomic status correlates to low success (Bowman et al., 2018; McGee & Pearman, 2015). No single initiative has successfully eradicated the academic deficits, closed the

achievement gaps, or mended the financial or social woes of these students who do not meet academic standards (Baker et al., 2016).

Studies have identified the poor academic performance of Black male students as a crucial educational matter (Dahl & Lochner, 2012; Reeves & Halikias, 2017). This issue is crucial because students' performance in the classroom determines the students' willingness and ability to further their education. The Alliance for Education (2018) reported that one in six students in the United States who enter ninth grade dropped out before completing high school because of factors such as poor academic performance, poor socioeconomic conditions, personality dispositions (National Research Council, 2001), low classroom motivation, and disinterest in classroom activities (Schott Foundation of Public Education, 2010). In 2018, the dropout rate among Black students was 6.4%, which was higher than that of White students at 4.2% and the national average at 5.3%, and Black male students record a higher dropout rate of 7.8%, compared to Black female students who record a lower dropout rate of 4.9% (Cai, 2020). Students who fail to complete school often have limited educational levels, and these levels have lasting consequences on their future careers and life choices (Bowman et al., 2018).

Lower education levels have economic effects on individuals and society, and Black students experience these economic effects more than other demographics. Cai (2020) reported that in 2018, Black students constituted 22% of youth (18-24 years) neither attending school nor working, a percentage much higher than the national average of 14%. Per Taylor et al. (2014), high school dropouts and high school graduates are more likely to be underemployed or unemployed and poorly paid than their college-educated counterparts. Taylor et al. (2014) attributed this disparity in employment opportunities to the decline in the value of a high school diploma, whereas Holzer and Dunlop (2013) attributed these disparities in income to educational

attainment (high school or college degree) and gaps in achievement (test scores and grades). College graduates have access to 30% more employment opportunities and earn 60% more than high school graduates (Bonnie et al., 2015; Holzer & Dunlop, 2013). Dahir and Cinotti (2018) reported that “a high school dropout earns \$260,000 less than a high school graduate and \$1 million less than a college graduate does” (Dahir & Cinotti, 2018, p. 4). This disparity in employment opportunities and earnings paints a bleak picture not only for high school dropouts, but also for the U.S. economy, which would have gained 3.1 million dollars had these high school dropouts graduated (Alliance for Education, 2018).

Lower education levels affect the health and life expectancy of individuals (Braveman & Gottlieb, 2014; Caselli et al., 2014). Life expectancy is higher among populations with higher education levels than those with lower education levels (Caselli et al., 2014; Montez & Friedman, 2015). The association between life expectancy and education is explained by Montez and Friedman (2015), who argued that people develop abilities such as better cognitive functions (writing, reading, and communicating), critical thinking, analytical thinking, and problem-solving skills the longer they are in school. These abilities enable them critically to analyze behaviors that can cause poor health and implement measures that will help them avoid these behaviors, thus leading to higher life expectancy (Caselli et al., 2014; Lutz et al., 2014; Luy et al., 2019; Montez & Friedman, 2015). Conversely, lower levels of education lead to poor lifestyle choices that trigger health complications such as diabetes, heart disease, and diminished physical abilities (Braveman & Gottlieb, 2014). These poor lifestyle choices are also a result of limited access to resources, health insurance, and medical care because of poor job opportunities available to people with lower education levels (Braveman & Gottlieb, 2014).

Other effects of lower education levels include a life of crime and incarceration, as Dahir and Cinotti (2018) note. Because lower educational levels present so few economic opportunities, high school dropouts are often plagued with economic challenges that lead them to a life of crime as a means of survival (Dahir & Cinotti, 2018). The Children's Defense Fund (2020) reported that arrest rates for high school dropouts are three-and-a-half times higher than are those for high school graduates. Also, high school dropouts are eight times more prone to end up incarcerated than high school graduates (McFarland et al., 2016).

Black male middle school students are worth exploring because they are lagging academically, less likely to break the trend of family poverty, less likely to attain a high school diploma, and more likely to be punished harshly in school and by the judicial system (Losen & Skiba, 2010). Middle school compounds these issues with physical, emotional, and social transitions with very little social support to ease these transitions. Furthermore, the demands of literacy skills increase in middle school, and those who struggled in elementary may begin to disengage from curriculum and school because of the academic challenges, leading to negative results (Below et al., 2010). The consequences of low academic performance in school can translate into disproportionate special education referrals, involvement in the criminal system, and academic disengagement (Davis, 2017).

Given the academic challenges faced by Black male middle school students and the adverse consequences they carry, it is essential that educators identify factors that can foster academic achievement and success in Black male students and change the current narrative about this population. Some Black male students show high achievement in core subjects of reading, math, and science (Lea, 2011). Understanding the positive and significant factors that contribute to high academic achievement among this group of students who achieve academically despite

living in desolate, high-poverty areas is imperative. Inquiring into the Black male middle school student discourse can help highlight in-school and out-of-school factors that potentially help these students make the positive connection between the school and home environment (Engerman & Bailey, 2006; Wamala et al., 2013). Students' perception of what adds to their academic experience can provide an inside view of upward trends toward achieving strong academic credentials. According to Hawes and Plourde (2005), family, the school organization, and teachers all have a role to play in maximizing the academic potential of students. The perceptions of Black male middle school students concerning the factors supportive to their academic achievement can provide insight into how to help Black male students who are underachieving. This study not only speaks to the significance of understanding these students' perceptions of academic achievement, but the study also assists schools in comprehending ways to influence and support Black male students (McGee & Pearman, 2014).

Past research has focused on the deficits of the percentage of Black males who fail academically (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Toldson & Anderson, 2010). As long as that percentage is not 100%, the remaining percentage is comprised of students who are performing well. However, this population is rarely represented, especially at the middle school level (Dornbusch et al., 1987). Because existing research has concentrated on contributors to this dilemma of Black male students, much less is known about what prompts and promotes the mindset for academic achievement and resilience of those who are academically successful in school (Berry, 2008). Although studying those who are underachieving is important, there lies greater importance in focusing on the percentage who can offer a voice to their generation of performers in the academic setting.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative, interpretive, phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of select Black male students who have been academically successful in a high-poverty rural middle school in the Southern United States.

Overview of Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Bandura's (1977) SCT was selected to frame this study theoretically. A well-known cognitive theory, SCT was developed by Bandura from Holt and Brown's (1931) social learning theory (SLT), which asserted that imitation is a prerequisite of learning. Neal Miller and John Dollard further developed the theory in 1941, arguing that drives, cues, responses, and rewards also contribute to learning (Miller & Dollard, 1941). However, Bandura believed a social context was needed because direct reinforcement did not account for all modes of learning (Evans, 1989). Bandura (1977) refined the SLT model, renamed it, and added additional aspects. Most important for this study was Bandura's addition of the concept of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy, a component of self-regulation, is a measure of how much individuals believe their actions will determine their achievement (Bandura, 1986). According to their sense of self-efficacy, individuals judge how much effort they will give to activities and how long they will persist in them. An individual's belief in their own adeptness to perform specific behaviors is impacted by personal values, as well as motivation (Bandura, 1986).

Because of its focus on how student behaviors both influence and are influenced by their educational efforts, SCT serves as the preferred theoretical framework over other pedagogical approaches. The SCT suggests that an individual's behavior is the result of life experiences, general outlook, and observations of others' behavior (Cullen, 2011). Social interactions with peers, teachers, and family are all perceived to impact a student's educational progress and

attainment (Dowden et al., 2014; Flashman, 2012). In order for students to reach expected outcomes, they must possess drives, instincts, influences, and practices to achieve the desired levels of learning and development. The SCT expounds on the behavioral aspects of individuals as critical indicators of what is valued, accentuated, and pursued (Rowley & Wright, 2011). It also emphasizes that people learn and display behaviors through the influence of example, whether it is intentional or inadvertent (Hurd et al., 2009; Shehata et al., 2015).

The SCT is guided by four constructs (Pajares et al., 2009). These constructs, human agency, human capabilities, vicarious learning, and self-efficacy were important to this study. Human agency is exercised through intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness (Bandura, 1989). Human capabilities includes regulation of one's own learning (Bandura, 1989). Vicarious learning includes learning through observation of others (Bandura, 2006). Self-efficacy includes thoughts of self and ability to perform well on a task (Bandura, 2010).

The SCT supports a conceptual connection between personal, behavioral, and social-environmental influences. These constructs of SCT framed the study. Per the theorist, "SCT favors a conception of interaction based on triadic reciprocity" (Bandura, 1986, p. 23). Triadic reciprocity entails the mutual exchange of influence between the personal, behavioral, and socio-environmental factors at play in an individual's development. It is a complex network of interchange between causal factors, each of which serves as a determinant of one or both of the others (Bandura, 1986). These causal factors are defined as follows:

Behavioral factor refers to the knowledge and skill required to perform a given behavior; it also refers to the promotion of mastery learning through skill and training (Bandura, 1986). Personal factor refers to any cognitive, affective, or biological event. Socio-environmental factor refers to any outside influence that might affect a person's behavior; such influences can include

school culture, physical surroundings and climate, and student-teacher relationships (Bandura, 1986).

Each element of reciprocity involves bidirectional and mutual influence processes. Reciprocal effects do not necessarily happen conjointly or simultaneously; some influences may weigh heavier than others, and one may be eliminated altogether (Bandura, 1989). Praise from adults is one example of a two-way reciprocal interchange; in this case, behavioral and socio-environmental are factors because children do not receive praise unless they have done something perceived as noteworthy by someone in their immediate environment.

Student achievement can be framed through the triadic reciprocity of SCT because of the link it provides between the variables emphasized in school and those experienced at home that allow for individualized academic growth; these variables both determine and are determined by interactions between a student's personal, behavioral, and socio-environmental factors (Bandura, 1986). Bandura's SCT is thus relevant to this study in that its focus on reciprocity, expectancies, and self-efficacy can help to explain how student learning and student achievement are influenced not just by an individual's inherent sense of agency, but also by the individual's social and environmental milieu and their resultant complex of influences. Researchers (e.g., Griffin & Galassi, 2010; Robinson & Harris, 2014) have correlated the problems of Black males' academic performance to social and environmental barriers that increase and worsen psychological and educational outcomes. The examination of these barriers and subsequent student behaviors can help educators extend their understanding of Black male academic achievement and advancement.

Methodologically, this study is qualitative and interpretive phenomenological in nature. Qualitative research is compounded in focus (Patton, 2002). It involves an interpretive,

naturalistic approach “to gain understanding of, make sense of, or interpret a phenomenon in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Smith, et al, 2009). Qualitative research involves the use, collection, and study of empirical materials such as personal experience, interview, observational, interactional, and visual content (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). “Phenomenological research design focuses on making meaning of a quintessential element of the human experience” (Patton, 2002). The focus of phenomenology is finding an understanding of a phenomenon as seen through the eyes of those who have experienced it (Patton, 2002). “The focus of a phenomenological study is in revealing and explaining the innermost nature of the participants’ mental processing about common experience” (Patton, 2002). Interpretive phenomenological analysis gives voice and concern to the detailed examination of personal lived experiences (Smith et al., 2009).

This research design was selected because it was the most appropriate to attain the study’s purpose, which was to explore the lived experiences of select Black male students who have been academically successful in a high-poverty rural middle school in the Southern United States. A strength of this qualitative, phenomenological research design is the design’s ability to provide an understanding of the lived experiences of a phenomenon, as well as the meaning ascribed to it by those who experienced it (Aagaard, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Giorgi, 2009). The assumption was that this approach would yield the depth needed to understand the lived experiences of Black male students as it relates to their academic success. According to Giorgi (2009), obtaining authentic and thorough descriptions from the people who have experienced a phenomenon is the initial step in the empirical research process. Unlike a quantitative design in which the focus is on numerical data and objectivity in interpreting the

data, qualitative research focuses on data derived from real-world experiences and is subjective in its interpretation of that data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hussain et al., 2013; Leung, 2015).

Documents, interviews, and observations were identified as appropriate data collection tools for this study because these sources allowed me to delve into the participants' experiences in depth and breadth (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Documents such as cumulative records and assessment dashboard enabled me to gather preliminary data about the participants that were pertinent to purposefully selecting study participants who met the selection criteria: (a) a score of Average or High Average on the 2017–2018 standards-based state exams, and (b) a GPA of 3.0 or higher in reading and math. Interviews enabled participants to share their experiences as they related to the research phenomenon and allowed me to gather rich descriptions of participants' experiences of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Observations enabled me to verify any inconsistencies between participants' answers and their practices (Alshenqeeti, 2014) as well as to note behaviors and practices relevant to the research phenomenon that participants did not mention in their interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

I served as the primary data analysis tool, eschewing the use of a transcription software and a qualitative data analysis software. I used the five steps for analyzing qualitative data proposed by Roberts (2010) to guide the data analysis. Step 1 consisted of reading the interview transcript multiple times. Step 2 consisted of organizing and coding the responses to the interview questions. Step 3 consisted of identifying themes. Step 4 consisted of reporting the findings. Step 5 consisted of crosschecking the validity of the findings (Roberts, 2010).

Research Questions

This qualitative, interpretive, phenomenological study sought to answer the following topic-based central research question: What are the lived experiences of academically successful

Black male students in a high-poverty rural middle school in the Southern United States?

Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following secondary subquestions, which were based on Bandura's SCT:

RQ1: What factors in the educational environment do Black male students in a high-poverty rural middle school identify as supportive to academic achievement?

RQ2: What behaviors do Black male students in a high-poverty rural middle school perceive as supportive to their academic achievement?

RQ3: What personal factors do Black male students in a high-poverty rural middle school perceive as supportive to their academic achievement?

Assumptions of the Study

Assumptions refer to underlying beliefs I have about the study (Newman et al., 1997; Simon, 2011). I made certain assumptions about the study pertaining to the selection of participants and the relevance of their experiences. The first assumption is that gathering data from middle school Black male students would clarify both internal and external reasons for the academic success of some Black male students in school (Wargo, 2015). Because this study sought to address academic achievement among Black male students, I believed it would be appropriate to collect data from Black male students who have been academically successful. The second assumption is that the experiences of the Black male students selected for this study and the meaning of those experiences are predicated on the interaction of the Black male students with their social environment, familial supports, school environment, and other life events. I made this assumption because Bandura's (1986) SCT theorizes that human learning and/or development occurs not only through personal experiences but also through examination of the actions of others and the results of those actions. Thus, by studying the experiences of

these Black male students, I hoped to understand how their social environment, familial supports, school, and other life events contributed to their academic achievement. The third assumption is that the thoughts and learning experiences expressed by participants would aid in outlining the extent to which their interactions affect their academic performance (Anyaka, 2017). I made this assumption based on Creswell's (2013) assertion that qualitative research allows participants to tell their stories, thereby allowing for an understanding of a phenomenon by exploring people's experiences and the meaning of those experiences. By asking probing questions to encourage participants to share their learning experiences, I anticipated recognizing any connections that may exist between the participants' learning experiences and their academic performance. The final assumption is that the study participants would answer the research questions completely, honestly, and thoroughly. I made this assumption because of the belief that participants would be inclined to be truthful in their responses when assured of their anonymity and the confidentiality of the answers they would provide (Simon, 2011).

Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

Delimitations are characteristics within my control that bound the study and limit its scope. Conversely, limitations are characteristics of the study that are outside my control (Simon, 2011). The following subsections will explore the delimitations and limitations of this study.

Delimitations

The first delimitation of this study was the choice to use a qualitative methodology and a phenomenological research design to accomplish the study's purpose. I wanted to discover environmental, personal, and behavioral factors that academically successful Black male middle school students perceived as contributing to their academic achievement. To accomplish this purpose, I needed to provide the opportunity for these students to tell their stories and

experiences, a process more suited to a qualitative phenomenological study than a quantitative study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hussain et al., 2013).

This first delimitation then informed the study's second delimitation, which was the choice of participants and number of participants. I delimited this qualitative study to twelve academically successful Black male middle school students in a selected high-poverty rural school in the Southern United States. I chose to study this population because of the limited research existing on Black male middle school students and the general perceptions that they are poor academic performers (Dixon-Román et al., 2013). Thus, I considered it important to study this population not only to change the narrative about them, but also to document the factors academically successful Black male middle school students might identify as helpful to improving low academic performance. To achieve this purpose, I employed purposeful sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to find the study's participants, following these specific criteria: (a) a score of Average or High Average on the 2017–2018 standards-based state exams, and (b) a GPA of 3.0 or higher in reading and math. I selected only 12 participants for the study because studying human phenomena is often complex and qualitative researchers recommend the selection of a small sample size in order to explore participants' experiences in depth and breadth (Creswell, 2013; Smith et al., 2009).

The third delimitation of this study was the decision to frame the study using Bandura's (1986) SCT. Other theories that were available, such as Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory, to measure individuals' motivation to carry out a task. However, I considered the SCT as a more appropriate theory for the study because it captures all the elements desired for the study: environmental, behavioral, and personal factors that Black male middle school students consider supportive to attaining academic success (Bandura, 1986).

Limitations

Generalization is a limitation of this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While it may be possible to generalize some findings, an attempt to generalize the findings of this study to Black males with different socioeconomic levels should be cautioned. Generalization is further limited by the geographical location of the study and its size; the study's findings may not be generalizable to other regions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While the 12 participants may provide a wealth of data, the qualitative nature of the study makes it difficult to generalize this information across a group of people (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research addressed this limitation by providing thick, rich descriptions that might help transfer the findings of this research study to similar research study contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Another limitation of the study also existed in relation to the chosen data collection methods of interview and observation. Interviewing research participants is a skill and an art (Oltmann, 2016), of which I am a novice. Observations are limited in that they focus on external versus internal behaviors (Creswell, 2013). The behaviors and actions of participants were recorded as they occurred. Discussions with participants about observations were not a part of this research study; therefore, explanations that led to external behaviors were not revealed by the participants. First, I addressed the inexperience in interviewing by making sure to validate the interview protocol thoroughly through expert reviews and practice when field-testing the interview protocol (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Second, I used the eProve eleot 2.0 classroom observation tool, a well-established observation protocol comprised of 28 items organized in seven environments to guide my observations (Cognia, n.d.). I combined these two data collection methods to address any weaknesses inherent in each method (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

A third limitation of the study was that my inquiry was limited to the research

participants' own levels of understanding and perceptions of their environment. Younger participants who may be inadequate in expressive language also pose an additional limitation which can affect the quality of the data collected (Patton, 2015). I addressed this diminished expressive language by observing participants' nonverbal cues as well as using probing questions to capture the true meaning of participants' responses closely (Bernard & Ryan, 2010).

Significance of the Study

It is critical for educators to improve the academic achievement of Black male students, a group that falls below other populations of students in reading and math (McFarland et al., 2016; Rowley & Wright, 2011). The lower levels of progress are linked to barriers that create an achievement gap (Burke & Sass, 2013; Rowley & Wright, 2011; Sari, 2012). Per Henfield et al. (2014), existing educational gaps show that Black students lag behind White students in academic achievement. By conducting this study, I hoped to add to the limited scholarly literature on the lived experiences of those students in this population who have excelled academically in spite of the socioeconomic obstacles they face. Few studies have documented the lived experiences of Black male middle school students and their perceptions of the factors that have contributed to their academic achievement. Also, this study provides an opportunity to hear firsthand the struggles and successes of a select sample of Black male middle school students. This study identifies strategies that these academically successful Black male students in a rural middle school setting used to attain academic success. Furthermore, this study adds to the literature by providing a lens through which educators can gain an understanding of how Bandura's (1986) SCT can impact the academic achievements of Black male students in rural middle schools in the Southern United States.

Secondly, this study contributes to practice by providing teachers and other education practitioners with knowledge about factors in the educational environment that Black male students in a high-poverty rural middle school consider as supportive to their academic achievement. Research records the low academic performance of Black male students in today's classroom (Dixon-Román et al., 2013), a phenomenon that calls for educators to find the methods, strategies, and insights necessary to reach the students who often perform below average. In some cases, Black male students' mean scores in reading, math, and science were more than one standard deviation lower than White students' mean scores in the same subjects (Dahl & Lochner, 2012; Dixon-Román et al., 2013; Simms, 2012). Research shows that teachers' and other educational practitioners' behaviors can contribute, whether intentionally or unintentionally, to their students' sense of self-efficacy (Rowley & Wright, 2011). Given the consistently low academic performance recorded for Black male students (Dixon-Román et al., 2013), as well as the existing unfavorable perceptions of them (Archambault et al., 2012), educational practitioners would benefit from the knowledge of the factors that can contribute to Black male middle school students' perceived self-efficacy in the classroom. Furthermore, Lucio et al. (2012) aptly captured this sentiment by emphasizing the need for teachers and other education practitioners to have a deeper understanding of how to avoid classroom failure. Knowledge of which behaviors Black male students consider supportive of their academic achievement will be of particular benefit to practitioners who are in daily, direct contact with these students. Lastly, once the voices of academically successful Black male students are heard, educators may be able not only to offset the risk of failure in school for lower achievers but also to address students' achievement proactively, thereby fostering remedies in support of improved academic achievement (Bong et al., 2012). Generating knowledge about what Black male

students in a high-poverty rural school consider as supportive of their academic achievement aids the field in determining remedies to the achievement gap.

Finally, this study contributes to policy in three ways: (a) providing feedback on existing educational policy, (b) providing insight about Black male students' perspectives on academic achievement, and (c) providing a focus on a neglected subpopulation of Black male students. Findings from this interpretive phenomenological study provide relevant feedback to policymakers and school personnel as well as colleges and high school administrative leadership programs relative to the academic achievement of Black students. This feedback about supportive factors in the educational environment may be useful in the development of educational policies. With this knowledge, policymakers can adjust educational policies to incorporate more of these favorable factors. Next, if more Black males are to succeed in school, policymakers and educators must understand Black male students' perspectives on students' own academic achievement (Bong et al., 2012; Cunningham et al., 2009); this study provides that perspective. Finally, limited research exists about the factors that foster academic success among Black male middle school students and why some students perform better than their peers although these students are learning in the same setting (Pitre, 2014). Education reformers have focused on early childhood and high school graduation but have neglected the middle school years (Yaffe, 2012). Being aware of these factors may help policymakers craft policies that can positively affect this group of students during their middle school years and beyond.

Definition of Terms

Academic Achievement

This term refers to a student's attainment of a certain level of competence after completing a particular phase of education, which can include either a classroom level or 12 years of schooling (Swanson et al., 2012).

Academic Success

This term is used to correlate positive outcomes assessed for students and is interchangeable with the term "student success" (York et al., 2015). The term is inclusive of academic achievement through learning content objectives, desired skills and competencies, self-satisfaction, persistence, and performance. For the purpose of this study, this term is used to describe the performance of students who maintain a cumulative GPA of 3.0 or higher in reading and math and achieve a proficiency score on a state assessment.

Achievement Gap

This term refers to an ongoing disparity of educational achievement among distinct categories of populations of students, specifically gender and race, and is especially used in reference to disparities defined by socioeconomic status (Baker et al., 2016; Rowley & Wright, 2011; Simms, 2012).

Adequate Yearly Progress

This term refers to the mandated benchmarks instituted from 2002–2015 by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (2002). Annual academic progress expected of states, school districts, and Title I schools measured the benchmarks (Wiley et al., 2005).

Black

The term refers to a person with origins in Black racial groups of Africa (Simms, 2012).

High-Poverty

The term as defined by the United States Department of Agriculture is students who are eligible for free and reduced lunch programs as a result of the level of poverty experienced by family (Child Nutrition Programs: Income Eligibility Guidelines, 2019).

Low-Achieving Student

This term refers to students who fail to meet the expected requirements for student performance and achievement determined from a set of benchmarks. These students' lack of achievement may be due to poor academic performance, learning disabilities, or cognitive deficits (Kearns & Fuchs, 2013).

Poverty

This term includes a myriad of concepts, including economic, social, and political disadvantages (Engle & Black, 2008). It refers to the state of economic deprivation in money and resources.

Professional Development

This term is described as “the sum total of formal and informal learning experiences throughout one’s career from preservice teacher education to retirement” (Fullan & Steigelbauer, 1991, p. 326). It refers to any activity undertaken for the individual improvement and development by collaboration, coaching, mentoring, or continuing education.

Rural

This term is used to describe an area that is sparsely populated (Lindahl, 2011); it has been defined in reference to population density, geographical location and features, and economic development (Arnold et al., 2007).

School Accountability

This term refers to a school's responsibility for improving student achievement by effectively teaching established curricular standards. Alterations in curriculum and instruction, the design of testing practices, effects on student outcomes, and faculty initiatives may evidence measures of this responsibility (Gunzenhauser & Hyde, 2007).

Successful Student

This term refers to goal-oriented students who are intrinsically motivated to succeed and can effectively balance the aspects of the school environment (Spilt et al., 2012).

Title I

This term refers to Title I, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act, as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act. This program provides financial assistance to local educational agencies and schools with high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families to ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards. Federal funds are currently allocated through four statutory formulas that are based primarily on census poverty estimates and the cost of education in each state (U.S. Department of Education, 2015, para 1).

Organization of the Study

The study is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 included an introduction to the study and was followed by an overview of the background and contextualization of the issue, leading to the problem statement. The problem statement focused on the issue of the academic performance of Black males and was followed by the purpose of the study, which focused on the individual experiences of 12 academically successful middle school students and their perceptions of the contributing factors to their success. Next was an overview of the theoretical

framework of the study and methodology, the research questions that guided the study, the assumptions I made about the study, and the delimitations and limitations that bound the study. Chapter 1 ended with the significance of the study to literature, practice, and policy; the definitions of the terms; organization of the study; and the chapter summary.

Chapter 2 consists of a review of recent relevant literature that supports the study and the research questions. Following is a detailed discussion of the theoretical framework for the study, which is Bandura's (1986) SCT. The discussion of the study's theoretical framework includes the history and context of the development of SCT, the theory's proponents, the constructs, revisions, criticisms, and use in previous empirical studies. Chapter 2 ends with a summary of the major areas discussed.

Chapter 3 comprises a description of the study's research design, qualitative interpretive phenomenology, and strengths and weaknesses. The chapter continues with a description of the site for the study, which is Success Heights School; the participants, which are Black male rural middle school students; and the participant selection process and strategy, which are a purposeful sampling. Chapter 3 continues with a discussion of the ethical issues and permissions pertinent to the study; the data sources, specifically documents, interviews, and observations; a description of the research protocols and instrumentation and how they were field tested; and the data collection procedures. Chapter 3 concludes with a discussion of my positionality, the ways trustworthiness and rigor can be incorporated into the study, the data analysis process, and a summary of all the major areas covered in the chapter.

Chapter 4 comprises a description of the 12 Black male rural middle school students who were the study participants, a presentation of the findings, and an analysis of the findings. Chapter 4 ends with a summary and a foreshadowing of the contents of Chapter 5.

Chapter 5 commences with an overview of the study; the major findings of the study; the conclusions, which reflect on how the study addressed research questions; and an interpretation of the findings, which includes an analysis of findings. The chapter continues with a discussion of the study's implications and how the study adds to the body of existing research, policy, practice, and unexpected study outcomes. The study's limitations or characteristics that may affect the findings and my reflexivity focusing my beliefs and personal judgments follow the suggestions for future research presentation. The chapter ends with a summary of the major areas covered.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented a summary of existing research regarding the academic performance of Black males. Most studies of Black male students focus on students' low academic performances, especially in the crucial subjects of math and reading (Carter & Welner, 2013). With the possibility that Black male students' low academic performances in school can contribute to consequences such as disproportionate special education referrals, involvement in the criminal justice system, and disengagement from academic goals, researchers have identified this issue as a crucial educational matter that must be addressed (Dahl & Lochner, 2012; Reeves & Halikias, 2017).

However, the literature on academically successful Black male students from a low socioeconomic background is limited; furthermore, the research that does exist focuses on criminality and other negative trends of Black males with little attempt to discover factors that could predict positive academic development among Black males (Yaffe, 2012). The purpose of this qualitative interpretive phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of

select Black male students who have been academically successful in a high-poverty rural middle school in the Southern United States.

I use SCT (Bandura, 1986) to frame the study and its research questions theoretically in order to consider how behavior, personal factors, and environmental influences interact to affect the self-efficacy of Black male middle school students in the school setting. I collected the data for the study through observations and individual interviews with 12 Black male students in the middle school who have a GPA of 3.0 (80%) or higher. The findings from this study illuminate the behavioral, personal, and environmental factors that Black male students in a rural middle school consider supportive to their academic achievement. These findings contribute to the limited literature on academically successful Black male students and may provide practical information for both practitioners and policymakers to develop and implement interventions that could lead to improving the academic performance of Black male students.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this qualitative interpretive phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of select Black male students who have been academically successful in a high-poverty rural middle school in the Southern United States. The study sought to answer the following topic-based central research question: what are the lived experiences of academically successful Black male students in a high-poverty rural middle school in the Southern United States? Specifically, the study sought to answer the following subquestions, which were based on Bandura's SCT:

RQ1: What factors in the educational environment do Black male students in a high-poverty rural middle school identify as supportive to academic achievement?

RQ2: What behaviors do Black male students in a high-poverty,, rural middle school perceive as supportive to their academic achievement?

RQ3: What personal factors do Black male students in a high-poverty rural middle school perceive as supportive to their academic achievement?

Dahl and Lochner (2012) reported, "Child achievement potentially depends on a child's ability, as well as other past and present child inputs (e.g., parental time, books, neighborhoods, schools, and home environments)" (Dahl & Lochner, 2012, p. 1932). This chapter opens with a topical literature review that includes a discussion of many of these factors as they relate to Black male students and the students' academic achievement in middle school. The second part of the chapter provides a review of the theoretical framework underlying this research study, which is Bandura's (1986) SCT. The review of the theoretical framework includes sections on the development and refinement of the theory, its theoretical constructs, empirical studies that have used the theory in contexts similar to this study, and the theory's limitations. The chapter

concludes with a justification of the theory as an appropriate framework for the study and a summary of the major areas discussed within the chapter.

The study's problem, purpose, and research questions guide the literature reviewed in this chapter. By reviewing the literature on the factors that relate to Black male students and their academic achievement in middle school, I provide a background to the study's problem and establish the need for the study, which aligns with the study's purpose. The review of the theoretical framework aligns with the research questions because it enabled me to narrow the focus of the study's inquiry to the personal and behavioral factors within the educational environment that support academic achievement.

Topical Literature Review

Many research studies have addressed student failures and barriers to academic success, but this study gave Black male middle school students a voice in acknowledging the specific barriers they face. The study highlighted their unique path to achievement through reports of factors that have helped them remain resilient and overcome the odds against them. The Black male middle school students' vantage point is particularly important because although the history of enslavement may be a precursor to today's achievement gap, additional causes of the current gap between Black male students and students of other ethnicities may exist. By studying Black male students who were succeeding academically while living in economically challenged communities and interacting with their lower-performing peers, this study attempted to identify factors that influence the academic achievement of Black male middle school students. By identifying these factors, I hoped to provide insight that will help improve the performance of academically unsuccessful Black male students and narrow the gap between them and students from other ethnicities.

Social Environment

Research studies have shown that a number of factors influence the likelihood of Black male students attaining academic success in school (Galindo & Sheldon, 2012; Gaskins et al., 2012). Parent involvement, mentor influence, peer involvement and influence, school-related factors including teacher-student relationships and teacher efficacy, and the socioeconomic influence of poverty have all been linked to the degree to which students perform academically (Bowman et al., 2018; Howard et al., 2012; Reardon, 2016; Wiggan, 2008). This section reviews the socioeconomic-, family-, and school-related factors that influence the academic success of Black male middle school students. The section also provides an extended review of the literature on teacher efficacy and its influence on the academic achievement of these students.

Socioeconomic Factors. According to Matthew et al. (2016), the achievement gap can be attributed to unfavorable past and present social and economic conditions in which African Americans live. These unfavorable social and economic conditions are a manifestation of historical prejudice and discrimination against African Americans that result in inequities in the distribution of wealth and poverty among this demographic (Bowman et al., 2018; Gershenson & Dee, 2017; Matthew et al., 2016; W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2014). Poverty, an issue that continues to oppress much of the Black race in the South, impacts Black male middle school students in the Southern United States in many ways. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (2020) identified African Americans as having a higher percentage of poverty than any other population group in the United States. Per the Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups 2017 Report, statistics of children below 18 living in poverty in the United States identify Black children as the highest at 37%, Hispanic children at 31%, and Asian and White children at 12% each (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). Bowman et al (2018) and Matthew et al.

(2016) describe poverty as the absence of financial resources, economic goods, and/or means of support and identify poverty as one of the many determinants that can alter lives socially and educationally. Children who live in poverty may have less success educationally than children who do not live in poverty (Rothstein, 2015) because of their enrollment in low-income schools facing poverty and their limited access to quality education (The Children's Defense Fund, 2020; Dahir & Cinotti, 2018).

Poverty directly affects graduation rates. Students living in poverty are almost four times less likely to graduate from high school than those who do not, and poverty alone puts their future outcomes at risk (Hernandez, 2011). According to Cook (2015), students' economic status directly affects the percentage of students who graduate from 12th grade. The U.S. Department of Education (2015) reported that students who live in poverty are less likely to graduate than those who do not live in poverty, and the latter are three times more likely to graduate from high school. Academic disparities begin as early as elementary grades and continue throughout high school, and children who have lived at least half of their lives in poverty are 32% more likely not to graduate from high school than children who have not lived in poverty (Fiscella & Kitzman, 2009). As the group most impacted by poverty, Black students often drop out before completing high school (Alliance for Education, 2018). Cai (2020) reported that the dropout rates among Black students was 6.4%, which was higher than that of White students at 4.2% and the national average at 5.3%; Black male students record a higher dropout rate of 7.8% compared to Black female students who record a dropout rate of 4.9%. Students who drop out of school often have limited educational levels, which have lasting consequences on their future careers and life choices (Bowman et al., 2018).

Poverty alone is believed to put some students at a huge disadvantage in relation to educational opportunities and outcomes. According to Slavin (1998), high-poverty schools have fewer financial, social, and academic resources. Murnane (2007) claimed that many high-poverty schools are characterized by a lack of high expectations, a need for qualified teachers, and an absence of rigorous curriculum. Harris (2010) asserted that the lack of a rigorous curriculum, a scarcity of qualified personnel, and consistently low expectations are at the root of many problems faced by high-poverty schools. This lack of educational opportunities and outcomes put minority students who reside in high-poverty areas at risk of academic failure (Cook, 2015).

According to Badger (2014), the cause of the lack of educational opportunities and outcomes of many public school populations is residential segregation, which is quite problematic to Black male students' achievement. The correlation between the wealth of a community and the state of schools in the community exists because schools are partially funded through local land taxes (Badger, 2014; Baker et al., 2016; Carter & Welner, 2013). Generally, the value of property of White Americans exceeds that of African Americans, and this disparity in the value of property reflects in the property tax collected. When property value is high, tax revenue is high. As a result, schools populated with Black students are doomed to be the poorest facilities, and have less effective leadership and instruction than schools primarily populated with White students (Badger, 2014). Thus, property tax revenue also contributes to the growing achievement gap between the wealthiest and poorest schools (Carter & Welner, 2013; Rothstein, 2015).

Students living in poverty often lack educational support at home. The need to work to supplement limited income often leaves parents with limited time to supervise their children's

homework (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2014), which is important to helping students develop their reading skills and broaden their vocabulary (Payne, 2019). Parents living in poverty often have limited educational levels that also impact the educational support the students receive at home (Pace et al., 2017). Per Bowman et al. (2018), the communities in which poor students live also lack places that provide basic educational resources and materials, such as a community library. These combined factors impact the students' educational growth and school performance.

However, some students in high-poverty schools with limited resources do succeed, achieving high academic rates while others do not (Kahlenberg, 2013). Despite the historical association of low academic achievement with students living in poverty, significant gains have been observed in some schools that demonstrate certain academic practices (Carter, 2000; Marzano, 2003). Also, financial assistance does not necessarily "play a significant role in increasing students' achievement, even among the subgroups most likely targeted with supplemental services funded through the program" (Matsudaira et al., 2012, p. 14). While funding is important to schools, some schools experience academic progress even with limited resources (Kahlenberg, 2013).

While some students in high-poverty schools do perform optimally, there is ample evidence of the negative impact of low socioeconomic status on educational outcomes. Kieffer (2012) found that students with low socioeconomic status demonstrated faster reading growth when compared to students with high socioeconomic status, but this seemingly contrary evidence existed only in Grades K through 3. In Grades 3 through 8, students with low socioeconomic status demonstrated slower growth patterns when compared to students with high socioeconomic

status. Thus, research suggests that schools might compensate for differences in students' socioeconomic status early, but achievement gaps will likely increase over time (Kieffer, 2012).

Historically, there has been evidence of achievement gaps in reading and math between Black and White students (Atwell et al., 2019; Carter & Welner, 2013; Harris, 2010; Pitre, 2014). As of Fall 2017, Black students constitute only 7.7 million of the 50.7 million students in public elementary and secondary schools (Cai, 2020). Furthermore, only 7% of these Black students attended low-poverty high schools compared to their Asian and White counterparts who constituted 39% and 31% respectively of enrollment in low-poverty schools (Cai, 2020). The statistics show that Black students are largely represented in high-poverty schools at 45% of the population in those schools compared to White students who only constitute 8% (Cai, 2020). White students' average reading and math scores were in the 55th percentile while Black students' test scores were in the 28th percentile (Rowley & Wright, 2011), and an examination of the National Report Card from 1992–2019 shows Black students in fourth, eighth, and 12th grades consistently recording lower reading and math scores than White students (Cai, 2020). Furthermore, the 2017 graduation rate for Black students was 77.8%, which is below the national average graduation rate of 84.6% (Atwell et al., 2019). These statistics show that Black students, especially Black male students, are at a disadvantage economically, socially, and academically (Atwell et al., 2019; Casserly et al., 2012).

It should be noted that the income inequality between African Americans and Caucasians widens as the level of education increases (Harris, 2010). Cai (2020) reported that in 2018, Black students constituted 22% of youth (18–24 years) attending school, a percentage much higher than the national average of 14%. Per Taylor et al. (2014), high school dropouts and high school graduates are more likely to be underemployed or unemployed and poorly paid compared to their

college-educated counterparts. Dahir and Cinotti (2018) reported that “a high school dropout earns \$260,000 less than a high school graduate and \$1 million less than a college graduate does” (Dahir & Cinotti, 2018, p. 4). This disparity in employment opportunities and earnings paints not only a bleak picture for high school dropouts, but also for the U.S. economy, which would have gained 3.1 million dollars had these high school dropouts graduated (Alliance for Education, 2018). The impact of the achievement gap on educational attainment, employment rate, and income translates into a never-ending cycle of poverty that separates the races and makes upward mobility challenging for African Americans (Carter & Welner, 2013; Harris, 2010).

Despite what other conditions exist, economic status affects individuals in various ways. Prosperity is viewed as a determinant in the level of depression or pursuit of goals (Carter & Welner, 2013). Poverty is a complex concept including elements of social concern, political, economic depravity, and isolation (Engle & Black, 2008; Short, 2016). When children live in poverty, they are often without resources to prepare them for school: "School readiness, or the child's ability to use and profit from school, has been recognized as playing a unique role in escape from poverty in the United States and increasingly in developing countries" (Engle & Black, 2008, p. 1).

Family-Related Factors. Even when economic status and background factors have been taken into account, family-related factors—most notably, parental involvement—have been shown to be strong predictors of academic success (Hayes, 2012). Galindo and Sheldon (2012) note that the home is one of the most influential contexts at which learning and development are fostered. Many researchers have found that parents have more influence on their children's academic performance than other factors, including the school itself (Galindo & Sheldon, 2012; Garcia & Serra, 2019; Mo & Singh, 2008). According to Leithwood and Patrician (2015),

parental engagement can influence the disparities in family backgrounds and socioeconomic status. Parental engagement comprises parental expectations for children's academic performance, parenting style, and level of parental engagement in their children's schoolwork (Leithwood & Patrician, 2015). These characteristics define a child's home environment and impact a child's ability to gain the intellectual and social capital that is key to academic performance (Fuentes et al., 2019; Garcia & Serra, 2019; Leithwood & Patrician, 2015; León-del-Barco et al., 2020).

The beliefs and expectations that parents have about their children influence the children's academic achievement. Suizzo et al. (2014) conducted a study on mothers in which researchers interviewed 51 mothers of children, aged one to six, regarding their social aspirations and their beliefs about their children's future educational attainment. The findings reveal that 59% of mothers want their children to attend college and about 50% of the mothers believe that a good education is the key to more opportunities, greater autonomy, and better finances (Suizzo et al., 2014).

Among the study's participants, Suizzo et al. (2014) further identified two distinct models of parenting: *determination with intervention*, parents have high expectations of education; and *trust and laissez faire*, parent considers children's decisions about educational goals. During the study, mothers who followed the determination with intervention model held high expectations for their children, whereas mothers who followed the trust and laissez faire model believed their children should decide their educational goals for themselves. African American and Mexican parents strongly identified with the determination with intervention model; however, the parents' goals and concerns for their children differed. During the study, more African American mothers hoped that their children would surpass their own educational levels and that their children

would attain graduate degrees, whereas Mexican mothers stated that they would be satisfied if their children attained high school diplomas. Additionally, more African American mothers than Mexican mothers cited racism as a barrier to their children's educational attainment (Suizzo et al., 2014).

Conversely, European American mothers most strongly identified with the trust and laissez-faire model during the study. Because these mothers were not apprehensive about whether any social influences might become a barrier to their children's academic success, mothers identifying with the laissez-faire model offered their children independence in decision-making. These mothers, who pinpointed how education could provide benefits, incentives, and widespread opportunities, also mentioned the importance of using encouragement when their children had difficulties in learning (Suizzo et al., 2014). These findings are similar to those of Garcia and Serra (2019) who found that indulgent parenting, which involves lower levels of imposition and strictness, combined with higher levels of parental involvement and acceptance to be the best parenting strategy for South American and European countries.

Research has identified the positive effect of parental involvement on students' academic success (Leithwood & Patrician, 2015). Parent involvement is a multi-faceted concept that often includes three categories: home-based involvement, school-based involvement, and academic socialization (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Parents' reinforcement of academics in the home is home-based involvement, whereas school-based involvement may involve visiting the school, participating in school activities, and communicating with teachers (Day & Dotterer, 2018). Academic socialization is the practice of parents acclimating their children to the value of education (Day & Dotterer, 2018).

Jensen and Minke (2017) noted that parents could engage themselves cognitively, behaviorally, and emotionally in their children's education. Their study identified various styles of parent involvement, ranging from an authoritarian to a hands-off approach. Each type of parenting was shown to have benefits to children (Jensen & Minke, 2017). All styles of parent engagement influence student outcomes; when children's parents are highly engaged in their schooling, better academic achievement gains can be expected (Galindo & Sheldon, 2012; Morrissey et al., 2014). During the study, it was found that parents involved in their children's education can motivate them to higher academic work, which, in turn, leads to higher academic success (Jensen & Minke, 2017; Mo & Singh, 2008). Active parent involvement specifically includes reviewing class assignments, participating in conversations about school activities, and participating in conversations with other parents. Parent involvement also includes participation in school-held events (Lareau, 2011).

Although some research recognizes the importance of good parenting and its pivotal role in students' academic performance (Mo & Singh, 2008), other research indicates that parental involvement could impact students' academic performance negatively. Robinson and Harris (2014) suggest that parents identify specific ways to be involved with their children academically, arguing that some parent involvement could hinder high school students. In their longitudinal survey, the researchers analyzed ethnicities, level of parental involvement, and socioeconomic status within 63 homes. Robinson and Harris (2014) found that some parental behaviors such as visiting the child's classroom, communicating with the school about the child's behavior, and making decisions about which courses the child should take were identified as hindrances for the child's progress. Furthermore, the researchers found that, although homework assistance primarily benefited Asian and Pacific Island students, engaging in school and assisting

children with homework did not produce positive effects on standardized test performance (Robinson & Harris, 2014).

Additionally, because a child's wellbeing directly tied to parental practices, there are risks in some home environments that associate with attempts to improve academic success. Swanson et al. (2012), in their study of the home environments and school-related issues of 266 third-grade children, reported that parenting practices could affect children's education and achievement. At the conclusion of their study, Swanson et al. stated that risks such as having a controlling parent, witnessing conflict, or coming from a low-income family prevent children from learning how to manage negative emotions. In addition, students who possess multiple risk factors are likely to express poor adjustments in interpersonal interactions (Swanson et al., 2012).

Using an education longitudinal study of 202 students, Day and Dotterer (2018) investigated the connection between parent educational involvement and academic outcomes among low-income high school students in low-income high schools. The results of the study revealed academic socialization was positively correlated to educational attainment and to GPA. However, findings also state unclear results about strategies that support young people across racial and ethnic groups. Continuing, according to the study, lower GPA was associated with less home-based involvement and moderate academic socialization for Black adolescents (Day & Dotterer, 2018). Wang and Eccles (2012) revealed in their study that Black youth might better respond to no-nonsense parenting in comparison to other adolescents. This approach is a more structured and strict style of parenting that involves controlling strategies. Moreover, the study shows that a combination of lower school-based involvement, more academic socialization, and more home-based involvement is associated with lower GPA (Day & Dotterer, 2018).

Fathers too possess the ability to greatly influence the academic outcomes of students as early as pre-school. Baker (2014) found that African American fathers with more education are more influential on their children's developmental math and reading achievement than those without an education. In addition, the study claimed that home literacy involvement is a great predictor of reading literacy, which suggests the fathers' involvement in cognitively enriching exchanges improves a child's ability to solve problems, process information, and focus. Furthermore, fathers' interactions with their children link to cognitive strengths and critical skill development prior to kindergarten (Baker, 2014).

Also, children who are born into either single-parent homes or who live in a single-parent home because of divorce or death are at risk of experiencing lower academic success (Phillips et al., 2018). Phillips et al. (2018) conducted a needs assessment study with parents of Black male students to identify issues faced by their children that impact their educational and social development. During the study, some of the issues reported by the parents included a lack of social support for Black male students, a lack of male parental presence at home, a lack of mental health counselors to address the consequences faced by Black males as a result of exposure to violence, bullying, negative peer pressure, and the pressures of assuming a male leadership role at home (Phillips et al., 2018). The researchers conclude that there is a need for the creation of programs that can address these issues that the study identifies; by creating such programs, the researchers hope that Black males will experience lower rates of premature mortality, educational underachievement, and violence (Phillips et al., 2018).

Many Black students are raised in single parent households. In contrast to this statement, though, the National Vital Statistics Center report indicates that the childbearing rate for unmarried mothers decreased in 2010 for the second consecutive year by 4%, which was a slight

decrease to 40.8%; however, the childbearing rate for Black women was 65.3% (Martin et al., 2012). Moreover, despite the negative connotation of single parent homes, the deeper burden for the children is the quality of parenting used by the single parent.

According to Lareau (2011) and McKenna (2012), good parenting includes providing exposure to prudent practices to help solidify a prosperous future. In middle class homes, for instance, *concerted cultivation*, a phrase describing the essence of developing a child through scheduled activities, is often applied as a means of stimulating a child's development and fostering cognitive and social skills (Lareau, 2011). Also included in concerted cultivation is the use of discussions between parents and children as a means of conversation that fosters the children's cognitive and social skills. Furthermore, by participating in concerted cultivation activities, the parents micromanage their children's lives. Conversely, parents from poor and working-class homes do not practice concerted cultivation in their parenting styles; they practice a parenting style Lareau (2011) terms *natural growth parenting*. In this parenting style, parents give orders rather than discuss issues with their children and the children are often allowed to spend long unstructured time with friends and family, watch television, or roam the neighborhood with little interference from their parents (Lareau, 2000, 2011; McKenna, 2012). When parents use concerted cultivation as a parenting style, middle class children grow up confident in their ability to navigate bureaucracy, challenge authority, and manage their time wisely (Lareau, 2011); these skills enabled these children to maintain their middle class social position (McKenna, 2012). Children raised through the natural growth parenting style often lack the skills gained from the concerted cultivation parenting style because of their limited access to the opportunities available to children from the middle class, and they are often unprepared for adulthood.

Levine (2006) countered Lareau's (2000, 2011) and McKenna's (2012) findings, arguing that the natural growth parenting style creates resiliency, independence, problem-solving skills, and personal responsibility in children. According to Levine (2006), concerted cultivation parenting produces children who are often under tremendous pressure to succeed, accumulate wealth, and attain important social connections. Furthermore, Levine's study claims that this pressure often leads to substance abuse, anxiety, and depression among this demographic. The best parenting approach, Levine (2006) argues, is a balance between the two parenting approaches.

Although there is an abundance of evidence that parents' investment in their children's schooling is critical to academic outcomes, parent involvement diminishes as the child progresses through grade levels. Less than 50 % of middle school parents are academically engaged in school programs and activities (Mo & Singh, 2008). The implications for schools are that they need to understand how to maintain the parents' role throughout secondary schooling (Jensen & Minke, 2017). Because families tend to operate as the primary provider of either support or stress for children (Hill & Tyson, 2009), and because parents' active involvement with their children can influence school environments both academically and socially (Galindo & Sheldon, 2012; Mo & Singh, 2008), if schools want to increase student engagement and performance, the schools should seek to foster positive parental involvement by developing good relationships between teachers, students, and their parents (Kahlenberg, 2013). The shared responsibility between schools and parents creates a partnership that will transform students' academic outcomes (Kahlenberg, 2013). Together, the two entities can experience the impact of this dualistic approach to tackling academic issues while simultaneously creating a special bond between the school and the home (Galindo & Sheldon, 2012; Mo & Singh, 2008). School and

home should not be in isolation from each other (Suizzo et al., 2014); both entities seek the same objective of student and school success.

Mentors. A way that schools can support ongoing parental engagement is through the influence of a mentor. Jackson et al. (2014) suggested that schools should create mentoring programs for all students, particularly African Americans and Latinos. In terms of this study of Black middle school males, mentoring intervention—an effective tool that can counteract academic disengagement and failure—can potentially make a large impact on students in several ways. Quality mentoring relationships provide critical advice and counsel to help students gain confidence, build self-awareness, and maintain resilience in-and-out of the school setting (Dowden et al., 2014; Walters, 2016). Improved grades, daily attendance, and self-esteem are a few positive benefits that stem from working with a mentor (Wyatt, 2009).

In homes where suitable mentors are absent, it is ideal to consider a substitute. Considering that approximately 50% of Black children in the United States live in households without a father figure, mentors are needed to fill that role (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Gordon et al.'s (2009) study revealed that specific racial identity statuses are strong predictors of academic success. Furthermore, Jensen (2009) stated that because of their racial identity status, many students, especially those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, reside in communities that are devoid of adults who demonstrate the importance of academic and professional success other than their principals and teachers. Because students who live in high-poverty areas may be limited in exposure to influential people or opportunities that could positively affect them academically, role models can play an integral role in this capacity. Parents, in a study conducted by Phillips et al. (2018), reported a lack of social support as the top issue affecting the future success of young Black males.

While role models do not reduce the importance of a father, they offer support to males and to provide opportunities for male-oriented and race-specific interactions. Research has shown that one way to help Black males succeed, along with recruiting and maintaining male teachers, is the establishment of culturally identified mentoring programs (Gordon et al., 2009; Kafele, 2012). Same gender and same race mentors are associated with more positive mentoring outcomes. The concept of observing role models from one's own ethnic group is called the "similarity hypothesis" (Bandura, 1986). However, the "similarity hypothesis" does not suggest that a cross-race match could not result in a positive experience (Walters, 2016). Studies on formal mentoring programs that include cases of cross-race mentoring have suggested the need for an awareness of cultural values and a degree of cultural sensitivity (Liang & West, 2007). Having a strong racial identity is commonly believed to be positively related to academic success, and though findings are elusive in some cases, a relationship between the two, whether positive or negative, does seem to exist (Cokley et al., 2011).

Role models can also prevent delinquency and deviant behaviors (Vanassche et al., 2014; Walters, 2016). A positive emotional connection with same-sex role models has shown to help teach characteristics of self-control through observing, actualizing, and replicating actions of role models (Walters, 2016). Azmi et al. (2014) found adolescents identified film stars (34.8%), teachers (27.9%), parents (14.3%), and sportsmen (12%) as their role models.

School-Related Factors. According to Gable (2006), the need for humans to create and sustain close social relations is fundamental. When these social relations are formed in a school environment, the relations can create positive emotional support for students (Sari, 2012) and foster academic motivation that is crucial to encouraging students' participation in learning activities (Tezci et al., 2015). Students who feel a sense of belonging have a greater chance of

experiencing an optimized learning environment than those who do not; furthermore, being accepted, included, or welcomed in social relations leads to positive emotions (Sari, 2012).

Peer Interactions. Student peer exchanges take place in all aspects of school life. Some research findings indicate that student interaction with peers and their social support reinforce elevated motivations and goal setting (Duriez et al., 2013). Other research findings identify the positive impact of the achievements of peers on a student's performance (Kassarnig et al., 2018). The academic predictive power of students' interactions with peers occurs at the developmental stages of early adolescence and mid-adolescence (DeLay et al., 2016; Williams & Weiss, 2018). The potential of peer influences is an important issue in both elementary and secondary education (Burke & Sass, 2013).

Research has shown a lack of consensus about the connection between social networks and student academic outcomes (Burke & Sass, 2013; Park et al., 2016), and, thus, the influence of peer interaction on academic achievement (Burke & Sass, 2013). Peer influences can lead to negative results as well as positive. Sari (2012) reported that school disengagement and low academic achievement are associated with peer victimization. Peer victimization may, in turn, undermine cognitive and behavioral functioning (Ladd et al., 2017). Berndt (1999) stated that peer interactions negatively and indirectly impact academic achievement only when students spent more time helping their peers in the classroom rather than engaging in their individual learning. Similarly, Li and Stone (2018) reported that although social acceptance and support motivate students' school attendance, participation in many non-academic, friendship-related activities may reduce the amount of time students invest in their studies, thus impacting their academic achievement negatively.

Contrary to these negative findings, social supports can be linked to students' academic success (Somers et al., 2008). Research found a positive correlation between students' perceived social support and their learning motivation—a relationship that leads to academic achievement (Tezci et al., 2015). Social relations such as a supportive school community, referring to classmates and teachers, are vital to students' academic success (Song et al., 2015; Wentzel & Asher, 1995). In addition, Burke and Sass (2013) conducted a study utilizing a panel data set from students in Grades 3–10 over a period from 1999 to 2000 and from 2004 to 2005 to compare peer effects across elementary, middle, and high school math and reading success. Findings reveal that peer effects are small but statistically significant.

Furthermore, Flashman (2012) claimed that friends affect trajectories past middle school and college, but the friends' level of influence is greater in larger schools than in small rural schools. In larger schools, students choose peers who are similar in socioeconomic status and comparable academically, but in small rural school environments, these characteristics are not determinants for friend selection. Flashman (2012) claimed that the reason for the difference might be school size and enrollment: smaller schools have fewer choices for being selective in friendship.

DeLay et al. (2016) investigated same-sex peer dyads' influence on their individual member's mathematical reasoning. The results of the study reveal a positive correlation between mathematical reasoning and high friend acceptance. Friends who are highly accepted are more influential (DeLay et al., 2016). During the study, when high acceptance was coupled with a dyad interested in math, influence was elevated. This study's results showed how friend acceptance and influence ability can optimize classroom learning experiences and enhance the classroom climate. Likewise, Ariani (2017) identified the importance of social relationships and

interactions among students and their influence on fostering students' learning interests as well as their learning strategies. Cirik (2015) found that students' perception of social support from their peers triggers intellectual curiosity, increased learning efforts, reduced test anxieties, and improved academic achievement. Poldin et al. (2015) also determined that peer and social influences continue at the post-secondary level. Per the researchers, there is a strong effect produced when students share academic achievement goals. These effects are not always positive, though, as peers may also have distorted educational consequences (Poldin et al., 2015).

Teacher Relations with Students. Schools can also influence the academic success of their students. The degree to which schools incorporate educational learning opportunities into their settings and programs is connected to the students' success in school (Bowman et al., 2018). For example, participation in extracurricular activities can foster academic success among Black students as can effective teacher practices and engaging pedagogy (Bowman et al., 2018; Taylor & Ntoumanis, 2007). Offering professional development grounded in best practices is also related to education outcomes (Bowman et al., 2018; Taylor & Ntoumanis, 2007).

Numerous studies have investigated the impact of the teacher upon learning environments (Archambault et al., 2012; Li & Stone, 2018). Students' previous academic experiences with teachers are one of the strongest predictors of cognitive engagement and achievement in mathematics (Archambault et al., 2012). Furthermore, Song et al. (2015) found that perceived academic support from teachers fosters stronger mastery goals among adolescents. Therefore, teachers play a crucial role in the academic achievement of the students, and of the school.

In fact, much of the dynamics of the overall school environment are predicated on the teacher of the classroom. Teacher characteristics and instructional practices have been directly

linked to student achievement (Liu, 2013). Teachers' leadership through communication, as well as their expectations for students, the consistency of their daily practices, and the clarity of their instructions have been shown to bring positive results to most students. Gest and Rodkin (2011) asserted that teachers' perceptions of students shape the classroom social environment, which, in turn, directly contributes to important academic and social outcomes. Teachers' positive attitudes are transferred to students and eventually impact students' motivation, encourage engagement, increase self-worth, and increase sense of school belonging (Ross & Bruce, 2007). As a result, students performed better, reducing the potentially negative impact of elements such as socioeconomic status and ethnicity (Ross & Bruce, 2007).

In economically challenged schools, which are often without basic resources such as technology, highly qualified teachers, and books (Badger, 2014), the lack of resources can lead to a substandard education, which is a precursor for a future that is represented by social and economic deprivation (Dahl & Lochner, 2012). Other factors such as teachers' attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs about the academic potential of Black male students often impact these students' academic success (Archambault et al., 2012), either for better or worse. For instance, research suggests that teachers have lower expectations of Black male students (Garibaldi, 2007). Garibaldi's (2007) assessment of teacher attitudes about Black male students' prospects for postsecondary education revealed that 60% of the teachers in the study (65% of whom were African American themselves) did not believe their Black male students would go to college. The teachers made these assumptions about student potential as early as elementary school.

Similarly, Rojas and Liou (2017) claimed that a challenge to Black male students' academic achievement is the classroom teacher who lowers expectations for student learning because of feelings of pity for the students' life challenges. According to Rojas and Liou (2017),

this perception of pity, derived from a feeling of sympathy for Black students' collective economic circumstances, leads to the conviction that it is justifiable for such students to be exempt from a rigorous education. Teachers' reduced expectations negatively affect Black students as students internalize the concept of pity and the belief that academic achievement is an option that is not reachable because of their disadvantage (Rojas & Liou, 2017). Such perceived thoughts can destabilize students' actual aptitudes to learn. Because of such deficient perspectives, the teachers sometimes lower their expectations of Black students in the classroom (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968).

Also, Bowman et al. (2018) identified a teacher's lack of understanding of Black students' cultural similarities and differences as disadvantageous to the academic achievement of African American students. Per the researchers, African American students often demonstrate aggressive or passive behaviors that administrators and teachers perceive as evidence of misbehavior or poor academic ability. Bowman et al. (2018) argued that when these students face uncertainty or feel unaccepted in the classroom, they demonstrate these behaviors that have proven unsuccessful in past classes. Bowman et al. (2018) encouraged that teachers make the effort to discover the root of these behaviors rather than describing these students as being delinquent, disruptive, or having special needs.

Conversely, teachers' beliefs in, and communication of, the idea that every student can succeed academically is a common thread in high-performing, high-poverty schools. Per Adair (2015), teachers can positively influence their students when the teacher recognizes the academic strengths of these students and use those strengths as a springboard for addressing problem areas the students may face in the classroom. Learning takes place through positive interactions between students and teacher (Liu, 2013; Spilt et al., 2012). Despite the historical association of

high-poverty students and low achievement, Liu's (2013) data convey the idea that schools that demonstrate practices of high expectations will observe significant gains. Expressed high expectations shape instructional practices and can have a powerful effect across academic domains (Liu, 2013).

Teachers' relationships with students can lead to positive teaching and learning by influencing how students feel about educational processes (Liu, 2013). Liu (2013) conducted a study with 39 fourth-grade through sixth-grade teachers and 111 of their students. During the study, students were guided by the following research question: How do the Chinese fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade elementary school teachers and their students perceive and describe their teacher-student relationship? Liu (2013) concluded that students believe they have positive relationships with their teacher. In the study, students collectively used words like "loving," "caring," and "nice" to describe their teachers, and teachers used terms like "close," "harmonious," and "comfortable" to describe their relationships with students (Liu, 2013).

Teachers' beliefs about students are central to their relationships with students and their students' academic achievements (Spilt et al., 2012). According to the self-determination theory, students respond to teachers who acknowledge cognitive weaknesses or strengths (Taylor & Ntoumanis, 2007). When teachers have an active exchange with students and provide positive reinforcement about learning and self-worth, the educational environment is enhanced (Spilt et al., 2012; Zee et al., 2013). Zee et al.'s (2013) research sought to establish support for relationship patterns as predictors of achievement throughout elementary school. The research shows that students' increased interaction with faculty is closely connected to student satisfaction with school (Zee et al., 2013). According to this study, students who communicate regularly with

their teachers are more likely to express satisfaction with their peers, their academic progress, and their personal development. In contrast, Zee et al. (2013) reported that, for male students, low interaction with faculty links to lower academic gains, increased conflict, and relational stress. In addition, the research claimed that Black students from low-income homes are more likely to be in relationship trajectories that predict diminished academic growth (Zee et al., 2013). These findings indicate that, by increasing the number and quality of interactions between students and faculty, schools can have greater potential for academic achievement.

Lastly, via the legacy of its mandate to desegregate schools, the 1967 *Lee vs. Macon* case established a requirement for schools to minimize the disproportionate numbers of Black students referred to special education or suspended from school (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015). Because Black male students continue to be overrepresented in special education, disproportionately suspended, and disengaged academically more than other students, Alabama educators are mandated to follow the requirements of decrees designed to minimize the number of students identified as intellectually disabled. In effect, the continued ineffective outcomes of decrees mandated by *Lee vs. Macon* mean that educators must make specific attempts to improve the academic and social environments of their schools. Better teaching strategies, including improved teacher understanding of positive behavior supports and the value of holding high expectations for all students, are now a standard focus of school improvement via teacher efficacy (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015).

Teacher Efficacy. Research also reports the important role of teachers' self-efficacy on student achievement outcomes (Archambault et al., 2012; Liu, 2013; Zee et al., 2013). Self-efficacy is defined as the level of an individual's performance, motivation, and achievement. Teacher efficacy is a type of self-efficacy that defines the extent to which teachers believe they

can help children learn and perform (Zee et al., 2013). Grounded in Rotter's (1966) social learning theory, teacher efficacy was first introduced in the RAND study that examined reading programs and interventions (Ross & Bruce, 2007). Essentially, teacher efficacy refers to teachers' expectations about their ability to bring about student learning (Bandura, 1977; Ross & Bruce, 2007). Characteristics of highly effective teachers include the following: spending less time in small group instruction, spending more time monitoring and checking seatwork, and providing whole group instruction (Tucker et al., 2005).

Research indicates that teachers' sense of self-efficacy can increase students' achievements (Collier, 2005; Schunk, 2005). Gulistan et al. (2017) reported that highly efficacious teachers are more likely to increase students' achievement because the strength of their efficacy beliefs promotes the desired level of learning and achievement among their students. Gulistan et al. (2017) explored the relationship between teacher self-efficacy and students' achievement in secondary math. Overall, in Gulistan's (2017) study, a high correlation of .72 was found between teacher self-efficacy and students' achievement. In other words, when teachers believe they can influence students' outcomes, regardless of race, socioeconomics, or behavior, students' performance ultimately improves (Collier, 2005; Gulistan et al., 2017; Tucker et al., 2005).

Sarac and Tutak (2017) echo these findings that teacher efficacy is important because of its close relation to students' achievement. Whereas positive classroom teacher relationships can foster motivation toward academic goals, negative classroom teacher relations may lead to negative school associations that hinder students' motivation and engagement. Additionally, in reviewing the connection between teacher self-efficacy beliefs and adolescent cognitive

engagement, other researchers found that teacher beliefs can influence students' academic achievement, students' motivation, and students' self-efficacy (Bong et al., 2012; Liu, 2013).

Archambault et al. (2012) conducted a longitudinal study over a 4-year period, investigating the academic achievement of students in over 300 classrooms in 79 wealthy and poor, rural and urban elementary schools. The study results showed that academic gains are more pronounced in classes that have effective teachers in reading; furthermore, the gains, because of effective teachers, extend to low-performing students as well. These results suggest that effective teachers promote cognitive engagement and achievement (Archambault et al., 2012).

Teachers can learn self-efficacy practices to impact the students in their classrooms through professional development. Gardner et al. (2019) conducted a study on the impact of STEM professional development on teachers' self-efficacy, knowledge, and practice; the researchers findings indicate that professional development significantly improves teachers' self-efficacy and classroom practices, but not their content knowledge. Also, Zonoubi et al. (2017) investigated how two six-month professional learning community interventions contributed to the self-efficacy of experienced and novice teachers. The researchers findings show that the interventions improve experienced teachers' self-efficacy in language proficiency and innovative instructional strategies. The researchers also found that the interventions improve novice teachers' self-efficacy in autonomy, language proficiency, and classroom management (Zonoubi et al., 2017).

Yoo (2016) explored the effects of online learning programs on teacher efficacy beliefs with 148 teachers from various grade levels who had received explicit professional development on efficacy. Tschannen-Moran and Hoy's (2001) Teachers' Self-Efficacy Scale (TSES) was used to examine any changes in teacher self-efficacy beliefs after having participated in four segments

of the online learning program: motivation, observation, feedback, and explicit strategy instruction. First, participants in the study applied motivational theories and practices in their classrooms for a five-week period; second, participants observed their peers for additional experiential practice; third, participants received positive feedback as well as specific suggestions about their opportunities for improved learning in the classroom; and fourth, participants were taught strategies for "chunking" information into smaller segments for their students to focus on in order to increase both the cognitive and affective engagement of the students (Yoo, 2016). Thus, the study addressed areas of theory, explicit experience, and social persuasion within the realms of both physiological and affective practices. At the conclusion of the study, the teachers reported an increase in self-efficacy that they attributed to the online professional development (Yoo, 2016).

Implications for this study and other similar studies are powerful because studies show the potential of professional development to introduce new instructional ideas and improve the ineffective teaching practices, poor self-efficacy beliefs, and outcomes of teachers (Miller et al., 2017; Shahzad & Naureen, 2017). The findings of these studies also show that, once the researcher identifies behavioral and educational factors Black male students consider supportive to their academic achievement, professional development interventions can be used to train teachers accordingly, a situation that will translate into improved academic achievement for these students.

Self-efficacy and students' academic outcomes are positively related. Bandura (1977) infers that, for success, a sense of self-efficacy along with interactions builds resilience and, in turn, helps people to withstand obstacles and inequities in life. Greater efficacy leads to increased effort and determination, which leads to increased performance, and improved efficacy.

Conversely, lower efficacy leads to reduced effort (Sarac & Tutak, 2017). This reduced effort then leads to inadequate instructional outcomes (Sarac & Tutak, 2017). In turn, these inadequate instructional outcomes create a situation that leads to decreased efficacy beliefs (Sarac & Tutak, 2017). Furthermore, while research shows that teacher self-efficacy benefits both teachers and students alike, it is also “beneficial beyond the classroom” (Ford, 2013).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is Bandura's (1986) SCT. The SCT is a psychology-based theory that posits that individuals' learning and behavior are influenced by the interplay of factors within their social systems (Bandura, 1977). These factors, which are personal (i.e., affective, cognitive, and biological), environmental, and behavioral, create a three-way reciprocal model that shapes, reinforces, or alters learning. Bandura (1986) explains reciprocal determinism as "what people think, believe, and feel affects how they behave. The natural and extrinsic effects of their actions, in turn, partly determine their thought patterns and affective reactions" (Bandura, 1986, p. 25). Per the SCT, people facilitate change as well as respond to change by weighing the merits of a behavior or action based on their own experiences and the experiences of others and the consequences that arise as a result of those behaviors or actions (Bandura, 1986). Though a psychological theory, the SCT has been used in many fields including health, education, and sociology. This section contains a discussion of the proponent of the SCT, its development and refinements, its core constructs, its applications, its limitations, and a justification for the theory's suitability for this study.

Proponent and Development of the Social Cognitive Theory

Proponent. Albert Bandura is the proponent of the SCT. Bandura was born in Alberta, Canada, to parents of Eastern European descent. Although his parents were uneducated, they

valued education and encouraged Bandura to pursue it. This value for education was evident in Bandura's willingness to work in a woodwork plant to pay for his tertiary education at the University of British Columbia (Bandura, 2006; Evans, 1989). It was during this period that Bandura encountered pre-med and engineering students with whom he commuted to the University. His interactions with these students led him to enroll in his first psychology class and later major in the subject. Bandura then pursued a graduate study in clinical psychology at the University of Iowa, and it was during his graduate study that he became interested in social learning theory and the theory's pioneers.

Development and Refinement of SCT. The origin of SCT can be traced to Edwin B. Holt and Harold Chapman Brown's (1931) social learning theory, which asserts that imitation is a prerequisite of learning. Neal E. Miller and John Dollard further developed the theory in 1941, arguing that factors such as cues, drives, responses, and rewards also contribute to learning (Miller & Dollard, 1941). Per Miller and Dollard (1941), these factors allow an individual to determine if a behavior is worthy of imitation based on whether the behavior was reinforced positively or negatively.

Bandura expanded on Miller and Dollard's research when Bandura posited that a social context was needed for learning because direct reinforcement neither accounts for all modes of learning nor explains why individuals initiate a behavior even when there is no reinforcement present (Evans, 1989; Pajares et al., 2009). Social learning theory is based upon the idea that our interactions with others are learning opportunities. It has been considered a connector between behaviorist learning theories and cognitive learning theories because both incorporate principles of learning: reinforcement, punishment, extinction, and imitation of models (Evans, 1989). While behaviorists believe that learning is represented by permanent change in behavior, learning

theorists believe observation alone can serve as an avenue for learning and will not necessarily result in any outward behavioral change (Bandura, 1965).

Bandura and Walters (1963) expanded existing social learning theories to include principles such as observational learning, social modeling, and vicarious reinforcement. Bandura (1977) argues that people learn through their observation of the behaviors of others. Through their observations, people form similar behaviors and imitate those behaviors. Bandura expanded social learning theory through his well-known Bobo doll experiment, a series of studies in the early 1960s (Bandura, 1977). Using his students and colleagues, Bandura conducted the Bobo doll experiment to identify why and when children display aggressive behavior (Evans, 1989). Results from the experiment revealed the importance of modeling: children learn by imitating the behaviors they see in others. Bandura thus advanced social learning theory, changing the name to SCT because of the role of cognition in observational learning.

To emphasize that people learn and remember how to perform from the experiences of others, Bandura identifies three basic models of observational learning: a live model, a verbal instructional model, and a symbolic model (Evans, 1989). The SCT holds that individuals acquire portions of their knowledge base through live models (the observation of others in social exchanges), through verbal models (requiring interpretation of the models of behavior), and through symbolic models (which are interpreted according to one's beliefs about personal experiences). Outcome expectancies are anticipated to result after a behavior is imitated. These outcomes solidify why modeling, cognition, and behaviors are connected. For example, teacher instructions with clearly taught learning objectives, along with student achievement engagement, will likely yield positive feedback. The outcome is valuable to teachers and students (Bandura, 1986).

Furthermore, as SCT centers around the idea of acquiring knowledge that correlates to observation of models, Bandura identifies four conditions that are needed in the modeling process: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. On the one hand, when people meet each of these conditions, they can successfully imitate the behavior of someone else. The outcome that follows the behavior, reward, or punishment will create a premise for a repeat of the behavior (Holt & Brown, 1931). However, models may include media sources and personal imitations. Verbal and written behavior are also indirect ways of modeling. Thus, in the classroom, it would benefit teachers to remain aware of their positive and negative reinforcement, which is translated and interpreted by students and will produce a result (Bandura, 1986, 2009).

In 1977, Bandura further asserts that any behavioral changes would directly correlate not only to observations but also to a person's sense of self-efficacy. The determinants of self-efficacy include vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological states (Bandura, 1986). Thus, by the mid-1980s, a more comprehensive framework for learning theories was established (Bandura, 1999). The SCT developed via the expansion of social learning theory from its origins in behaviorist psychology to include human cognitive processes and the contexts within which learning occurs. With emphasis placed on cognition as it relates to programming and performing behaviors, SCT theorizes that people are not simply reactors to base inner impulses or stimulations within their environment. Bandura (1986) advanced some constructs important to understanding the theory. These constructs are discussed below.

Theoretical Constructs of the Social Cognitive Theory

The SCT is guided by four constructs that serve as a cornerstone to understanding the theory: human agency, human capabilities, vicarious learning, and self-efficacy (Pajares et al.,

2009). These constructs promulgated by Bandura's SCT were also important to this study. Research questions were developed with the understanding that personal belief systems, environmental influences, and personal abilities play a role in academic achievement of Black male students.

Human Agency. The SCT is theoretically founded as an "agentic" perspective that conceptualizes self-development, self-regulatory actions, self-reflection, and proactivity as inner forces that co-exist within a person's environment (Bandura, 1986, 2001). Bandura (1986) argues that individuals are an active determinant of their development and are capable of controlling their emotions, thoughts, and actions. The theory identifies three modes of *human agency*: individual agency, which is one's personal influence on the environment; proxy agency, which is securing the individual's interests through intermediaries' efforts; and collective agency, which is the collective action of a group based on their shared beliefs. Per Bandura (2006), human agency is characterized as having four specific and distinct properties: intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness. Intentionality is the individual's decision to be involved in activities; forethought is the individual's ability to consider the potential consequences of certain actions; self-reactiveness refers to the individual's ability to ascertain and control appropriate behaviors and actions; finally, self-reflectiveness is the ability to review and evaluate one's judgments and actions (Bandura, 2006; Pajares et al., 2009).

Human Capabilities. *Human capabilities* refers to the cognitive ability of individuals to acquire skills and knowledge symbolically and directly. Human capabilities are characterized by four properties: symbolization, self-regulation, self-reflection, and vicarious learning. Symbolization refers to individuals' ability to interpret the meaning of events within their environment, reflect on these meanings, process these meanings, communicate them to others,

and use these meanings as a means to guide their actions (Bandura, 1986). Self-regulation is the process by which individuals dictate and direct their actions and behaviors. The process of self-regulation requires the active engagement of functional thinking and responding to both inner and outer forces according to a desired outcome. A cyclic process requires an ongoing, conscious monitoring of one's environment, the task, and the expected results. Self-reflection refers to the process by which people interpret and evaluate their experiences, their role in those experiences, and their ability to accomplish short-term and long-term goals. Vicarious learning is the process by which individuals analyze and code observed behaviors as a blueprint for future actions. Vicarious learning also constitutes one of the major constructs of SCT and is further discussed below (Bandura, 1986, 2001).

Vicarious Learning. *Vicarious learning* enables individuals to evaluate and initiate new behaviors without going through a trial stage because their analysis of the behaviors and the attendant consequences determine whether the behavior is worthy of emulation, as well as how to perform the behavior. This third core concept of SCT is steeped in observational learning, which is characterized by (a) attention, which is an individual's decision to observe a specific behavior; (b) retention, which is an individual's cognitive and symbolic evaluation of the behavior to determine if it should be emulated as well as rehearsal of the behavior; (c) production, which is the conversion of the observed behavior into actionable steps that would be carried out; and (d) motivation, which is the incentive for performing the behavior. The motivation for performing the behavior is determined by the type of feedback received for performing the behavior; this feedback is known as outcome expectations and refers to negative or positive consequences associated with performing the behavior (Bandura, 1986, 2001).

Self-Efficacy. Bandura (1997) argued that for an individual successfully to enact an observed behavior, the individual requires self-efficacy. Bandura (1977) first described self-efficacy as the "belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1977, p. 3). Bandura revised his definition of self-efficacy in 1986 to "people's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances" (Bandura, 1986, p. 391) and later in 1994 to "people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives" (Bandura, 2012, p. 10). An individual possessing high self-efficacy beliefs has a more successful chance of achieving an intended outcome than an individual with low self-efficacy beliefs. Self-efficacy beliefs propel an individual to persist in the face of adversity in order to achieve a desired or intended outcome. This quality of self-efficacy makes it a more accurate predictor of what an individual can accomplish than the individual's past accomplishments (Bandura, 1997; Pajares et al., 2009).

Everyone has a level of self-efficacy, but it is not static. With experience, self-efficacy can improve; however, at the same time, self-efficacy can remain minimal if no action is taken to improve behavior or adjust behavior to experience some level of success (Prochaska & Norcross, 2014). Self-efficacy can be impacted by an individual's skills or situation, which means that a successful attainment of the goal is contingent on the individual's possession of the requisite skills; it is not sufficient for the individual to believe that they can accomplish the task. Also, self-efficacy is impacted by the individual's value for the expected outcome of the task; if the individual does not value the outcome of the task, then their self-efficacy for the task is reduced (Bandura, 1977). Self-efficacy can be impacted by social constraints that may exist in the environment in which the person intends to accomplish the task (Bandura, 1977). An

environment that lacks the resources necessary to support the accomplishment of the task or an environment with a structure that constrains the successful accomplishment of the task will impact the individual's self-efficacy to accomplish the task and, by extension, the achievement of a successful outcome (Bandura, 1977).

According to Bandura, the process of improving self-efficacy can be achieved by deciphering information in four areas: mastery experience, social modeling, physiological and emotional states, and verbal persuasions (Bandura, 1986). Mastery experience occurs when individuals' ability to achieve simple objectives enables them to accomplish more complex ones. For example, students who have experienced success with one task become more attentive and motivated to complete other tasks. Social modeling happens when an individual's self-efficacy beliefs increase from observing other individuals of similar stature and skillset accomplish the intended goal successfully; conversely, when these individuals fail to accomplish the intended task, the failure decreases the individual's self-efficacy beliefs. Physiological and emotional states refer to the experience individuals go through when they ponder over the intended task. Emotional and physiological reactions such as fear, anxiety, or stress toward the intended task impact self-efficacy beliefs negatively whereas reactions such as excitement and anticipation toward the intended task impact self-efficacy beliefs positively. Lastly, verbal persuasions refer to the verbal judgement or feedback that is given to the individual on their capability to accomplish the intended task. When the individual's capabilities are criticized, the criticism negatively impacts the individual's self-efficacy to accomplish the task; conversely, when the individual's capabilities are praised and cultivated, the praise positively impacts the individual's self-efficacy to accomplish the task (Bandura, 1986, 1995, 1997).

Also, the improvement of one's self-efficacy belief is tied to what Bandura calls identification, in that when similarities exist between an observer and model, the commonalities increase the likelihood that the behavior will be modeled. Furthermore, modeling is related to one's conviction that one has the power to function a particular way to attain a specific outcome. In other words, people learn when the model and observer are closely identified and the person believes that they can perform a skill with success (Bandura, 1986). That modeling is more effective when the observer who has greater self-efficacy suggests it is beneficial to develop one's self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy is developed primarily from enactive attainment or actual experiences. It is through actual experiences that one gets involved in the activity and determines if attainment or mastery of the activity is possible. In academic settings, self-efficacy is said to have various effects (Schunk, 2005). Students may avoid an activity if they possess a sense of low self-efficacy; however, those with highly efficacious attitudes will be more inclined to accept a challenging activity. One of most credible ways to gain information about self-efficacy is through performances. In classrooms and outside of classrooms, successful performances heighten self-efficacy. In turn, students gain information about their capabilities. Several failures have the opposite effect and negate a sense of high self-efficacy. Vicarious learning through observation of peers as they successfully complete activities conveys a sense that one can repeat the activity as well. Teachers provide students with persuasive information that improves self-efficacy by reminding the students that they have certain capabilities. This feedback has enhancing qualities if the student subsequently performs with success. How students cognitively appraise information determines how or if self-efficacy is influenced directly. Efficacy appraisal is a thoughtful, internalized process of weighing contributions of personal situational factors.

Factors such as how the outcome of a task is perceived, amount of effort expended, level of task difficulty, patterns of failures and successes, and type of circumstances all affect self-efficacy (Bandura, 1981; Schunk, 2005). It is important to note that successful performance outcomes do not necessarily create an improved sense of efficacy, and neither does failure create a negative impact. To help sustain motivation and self-efficacy, students must be provided with clear information that they are acquiring new skills and knowledge. In short, self-efficacy is the result of educational practices (Schunk, 2005).

Relevance of Social Cognitive Theory to This Study

Bandura's (1986) SCT is particularly relevant to this study because it relates student academic achievement to environmental factors that may influence the learning process via self-efficacy, reciprocal determinism, and outcome expectancies. It is particularly relevant to academic achievement because of the theoretical implications for planning instructional experiences and curriculum. The SCT focuses heavily on how cognition influences behavior. The SCT broadly explains socialization processes, including how people acquire societal norms. Furthermore, it asserts that individual human behavior is determined by triadic, dynamic, and reciprocal interaction of personal factors, behavior, and the environment (Bandura, 1986). The theory places strong emphasis on cognitive abilities and suggests that one's reality is the result of environmental and cognitive interactions.

Triadic Reciprocal Determinism. The SCT contends that human behavior is triggered by triadic reciprocal influences, which may include belief in self, responses to performance, or material support (Bandura, 2009). The interchange among several factors in an individual's environment partially creates who people are. Bandura's (1986) "SCT favors a conception of interaction based on triadic reciprocity" (p. 23). Triadic reciprocity defines human behavior as

dynamic with reciprocal causation occurring between behavioral, personal, and socio-environmental factors. Bandura proposed the concept of triadic reciprocity to explain how these factors work reciprocally in nature. Some bidirectional interchange between the causal factors will influence how particular individuals develop. However, these causal factors can sometimes be controlled; by carefully choosing our environments, we can manipulate the influential factors and thus, in turn, influence who we become (Bandura, 1997).

This study investigated students' perspectives on the factors influencing their academic achievement. The SCT is emphasized because the three causal factors identified by Bandura—behavioral, personal, and socio-environmental—are the constructs that governed this study. This study postulates categories for investigating the following determinants of human learning and behavior through an interactive, dynamic approach called triadic reciprocal determinism.

Behavioral Factors. In SCT, behavior refers to learning and the prowess one must acquire to satisfy a specific need or to support mastery learning through skill and practice (Bandura, 1977). The SCT focuses on learning through interactions, observations, and performance, including a person's response after a behavior is performed (Bandura, 1977). For example, this study's investigation included the significance of mentoring, students' receptivity to mentoring, and the frequency of emulating model behavior.

Personal Factors. Every person's knowledge can be directly related to their cognitive, affective, and biological behaviors, each of which can be central to the person's personality. In SCT, personal factors therefore include a person's cognitive, affective, and biological events (Bandura, 1977). The SCT posits that personal characteristics such as one's aptitude, skills, attitudes, and beliefs all have a role in determining what and how a person learns, and it emphasizes the role of an individual's self-efficacy, which is the belief individuals have about

themselves (Bandura, 1986). While SCT focuses on the impact of either high or low self-efficacy on a person's capacity for learning, SCT also includes as personal factors the elements of one's environment that can influence one's aspirations and self-efficacy; these elements include how a person is influenced by family and how a person is affected by social exchanges (Bandura, 1986). The environment in which someone lives also contributes to the person's behavior and cognition. According to Pajares et al. (2009), factors including economic status, family structure, and educational influences, while they do not affect human behavior directly, are important contributors because of their indirect influence on an individual's personality.

Socio-Environmental Factors. The environmental factors that can affect an individual's behavior include the conditions that make an environment conducive for improvement (Bandura, 1986). The SCT posits that people's lives are the product of their encounters, exchanges, and interactions. Each interaction, in all settings, has an impact. In the classroom setting, for example, students encounter the classroom teacher, who can directly influence, empower, or deflate them. The social environment of the classroom also consists of peers, including friends (Bandura, 1986). Furthermore, all encounters, exchanges, and interactions take place in a specific physical environment, in the school setting. This includes situational and physical features of the school itself (Gaskins et al., 2012). Thus, the school environment is inclusive of teachers, students, and the situational and social relationships within it. The connections between and among these environmental factors to a student's academic achievement makes SCT the appropriate theoretical framework chosen for this study.

While it has been researched rigorously, student achievement and its contributing factors specifically align with the concepts of SCT, a learning theory that recognizes the role of the student while emphasizing the interactions between and among a student's behavioral, personal,

and socio-environmental factors (Bandura, 2001). According to SCT, individuals are social agents with goals for the future (Bembenutty, 2010, p. 5). In this study, the personal factors included students' perceptions of their teachers as well as other individual preferences within the school environment. Furthermore, the environment itself consists of, but is not limited to, an individual's perceived levels of support within both the micro and macro-levels (Rubenstein et al., 2018). Therefore, the desire to succeed will drive some actions and behaviors.

From a theoretical perspective, individuals function as a result of the interplay among all influences (Lucio et al., 2012); however, researchers cannot derive non-refutable empirical data that explain the internal motivation of behaviors. Because it addresses all regulatory functions, including internal and external motivations, SCT is the most appropriate framework for this study. The explanatory power of this hypothesis lies in (a) the predictive accuracy of the theory, (b) the methods by which the theory yields and identifies the determinants of human behavior, and (c) the intervening mechanisms by which the determinants influence behavior (Bandura, 1977).

A theoretical framework provides explanations, suggests predictions, and helps to generalize about the phenomenon observed; SCT strengthens this study by helping to understand the phenomenon being examined, and it guides the research (Creswell, 2005). In this study, the phenomenon was the lived experiences of Black male middle school students, specifically their perceptions of supportive behavioral, personal, and socio-environmental factors, all of which were investigated through interviews and observations. According to SCT, self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectancies are influenced by an individual's demographics, individual differences, and socio-environmental factors. Furthermore, SCT is relevant for understanding behavior management perspectives in the school environment. I investigated the academic

achievement of the study's participants in relation to their school environment. The purpose was to explain how aspects of SCT can help with understanding how Black male students succeed academically in poverty settings.

Environmental factors such as socioeconomic status can affect a person's behavior. Poverty is a factor in behavior because, historically, it has been identified as a precursor to academic dysfunction (Dixon-Román et al., 2013; Harris, 2010). The SCT places emphasis on the significance of the environment. According to Bandura (1999), each individual dictates their future, but their lives are the result of internal mechanisms altered by environmental events. The SCT explains that people are "conscious players" of their experiences, suggesting that they are actively engaged in experiences as opposed to being merely inactive participants (Bandura, 1999). Teachers are embedded in the macro-environment, along with education administration, government practices, and assessment procedures. All these contexts may promote or inhibit the facilitation of the environment (Rubenstein et al., 2018).

Applications of the Social Cognitive Theory in Empirical Research

The SCT has been utilized in many fields. In organizational studies, SCT was utilized to study improvements in organizational performance levels (Bandura, 1988), collective organizational management (Wood & Bandura, 1989), self-efficacy, learning orientation, leadership, creativity (Gong et al., 2009), and job satisfaction (Hwang et al., 2016). In information system studies, SCT was used to study systems use and computer training (Agarwal et al., 2000; Chiang & Hsiao, 2015; Hooper, 2012; Wang et al., 2015; Yap & Gaur, 2016), the adoption of electronic services in the public sector (Agarwal et al., 2013; Rana & Dwivedi, 2015), and the use of the Internet (Collins et al., 2012; Hoffmann et al., 2015). In career studies, SCT has been used to study career decision-making (Blanco, 2011), job searching (Zikic & Saks,

2009), and determining educational and occupational choice related to career interests (Lent et al., 1994). In education, SCT has been used to study gifted education (Burney, 2008), student engagement and self-efficacy (Schunk & Mullen, 2012), and the impact of self-efficacy on the regulation of human behaviors and health promotion (Bandura, 1998, 2004; Cook et al., 2015; Krebs et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2013).

Many studies relate SCT to social and education topics (Burney, 2008; Lent et al., 2010); however, SCT has been utilized in relatively few studies related to Black males. To identify studies related to this dissertation, I conducted computerized searches in the University of West Florida library using a combination of keywords including *SCT in education* and *constructs of SCT and Black males*. The reference list was extensive, but limited studies used SCT as a theoretical foundation for understanding, exploring, and explaining Black males. A considerable amount of research has examined the idea that self-efficacy is the precursor in the connection between self-efficacy and performance results (Honicke & Broadbent, 2016).

Cheng (2019) used one construct of SCT, self-efficacy, as an external factor to determine perceived usefulness of visual programming environments among boys and girls. The study was designed to identify determinants that affect students' behavioral plan to use visual programming in the primary school context. Cheng found that computer self-efficacy is paramount to creating primary students' affirmative outlook about the benefit and comfort of using a visual programming environment.

Satisfaction and commitment arose from foundations of efficacy in Ramsey and Lorenz's (2016) study. The study was based on the development of cultural intelligence efficacy, and participating students who took a course designed to increase cultural intelligence were positively correlated to commitment and desire to access the course. Self-efficacy is specifically

identified under the tenets of SCT as the confidence in one's abilities to accomplish goals. It is associated with performance, motivation, effort, and emotional or attitudinal reactions (Bandura, 1977). Also relevant to the study was the fact that SCT is domain specific. In Ramsey and Lorenz's study, the classroom was emphasized as the specific domain. Participants with high cultural intelligence had domain-specific ability and cross-cultural confidence. Study findings revealed students with high outcome expectations of their study would have high satisfaction with studies. The reverse effect is true for students with low levels of cultural intelligence after completing the class. These students will exhibit lower levels of satisfaction and commitment as opposed to their counterparts with higher levels of CQ.

Using the SCT construct of self-efficacy, Talsma et al. (2018) examined the correlation between achievement goals and self-efficacy. The researchers applied a bi-directional approach to their study. This study identified self-efficacy as a non-intellective antecedent to student achievement. Through a meta-analysis longitudinal panel (two variables, two wave design), the researchers explored the reciprocity and equivalent strength of net directional effects in self-efficacious and academic performance relationships and also studied variables that regulate the self-efficacy and performance relationship. Overall, the results indicated reciprocal effects between self-efficacy influences on successive performance and vice versa. Performance was a significantly stronger predictor of self-efficacy than the opposite. Performance's effect on self-efficacy was almost three times bigger than self-efficacy's effect on performance (Talsma et al., 2018).

Burney (2008) applied several aspects of SCT to gifted education for the planning of appropriate curricular and instructional experiences for gifted students. The result of examining the implications of the theoretical extensions would lead to the development of a gifted education

model for advanced learners. SCT was used to outline how learning takes place. Burney (2008) specifically described vicarious learning, self-regulation, self-efficacy, and social influence as behaviors exhibited by high performers and learners. Burney (2008) believed that with these behavioral factors embedded in a learning model, the curriculum would foster higher performance and be appropriately leveled for students.

Literature has shown social supports are critical to the learning environment. Teacher-student support along with classrooms with peer support can improve student engagement and learning outcomes (Ahmed et al., 2010; Goetz et al., 2013). Supports may take on positive or negative forms, and both types of support may influence students' affective and emotional experiences. Findings revealed that when students feel support from teachers and peers, a positive value appraisal of mathematics develops and more attention is placed on learning activities, which alleviates anger and boredom because of increased enjoyment. Furthermore, a sense of security is prevalent when students feel they are in a supportive classroom environment with positive affirmations. These affirmations also increase enjoyment and alleviate boredom, hopelessness, and anger toward the subject matter (Frenzel et al., 2007; Pekrun et al., 2002).

Strengths of Social Cognitive Theory

Bandura (1986) developed SCT by identifying areas of weakness of behaviorism. The SCT acknowledges the full complexities of human differences beyond recognizing that they exist (Bandura, 1986). Therefore, education is considered a cognitive activity. The theory looks into the act that aids individuals in acquiring knowledge and how the individual discriminates information (Bandura, 1986). This approach focuses on the internal processes that allow people to respond to external stimuli.

Bandura's (2006) SCT has important implications in education. The theory outlines predictive ways by which individuals develop career interests, set goals, and persevere in a social setting (Bandura, 2006). Bandura argued that individuals possess self-regulation capabilities (Bandura, 2006). The individuals are inclined to accept more challenging activities after successfully completing a less challenging activity. With the successful completion of an activity, individuals' self-efficacy beliefs may increase, and the desire to persevere through the challenging task is enhanced.

The SCT can explain human behavior from experimental findings rather than clinical observations (Bandura, 1986). Findings from the famous Bobo doll experiment demonstrated children do not learn on their own but develop cognitively through the construction of mental models. In this experiment, children replicated behaviors gained through observational learning. Individuals are surrounded by models such as parents, family, television, and friends (Bandura, 1986). The SCT explains how observational learning can lead to learning and reproduction of observed behavior (Bandura, 1986).

Another strength of SCT lies in the triadic reciprocity. Internal processes spark people to respond to external stimuli (Flamand, 2017). The theory explains children's cognitive development through creation of mental examples (Flamand, 2017). The role of rewards in learning can be explained while the stability of behavior may be focused on the desire to receive the reward.

Criticism of Social Cognitive Theory

Although SCT has been used widely in various fields of study, the theory has faced some criticism. The theory has been described as too focused on the cognitive aspects that influence behavior (Flamand, 2017). This focus on cognition as influential to behavioral emulation is due

to Bandura (1986), who identified some key constructs that determine the adoption of behaviors in SCT as the “agentic” role that individuals play along with their capabilities to determine which behaviors are worthy of emulation. Bandura (1986) argued that individuals are active determinants of their development and are capable of controlling their emotions, thoughts, and actions; this ability is what Bandura referred to as the agentic role of an individual in their behavior (Bandura, 1986, 2006). Additionally, individuals possess a cognitive ability to acquire skills and knowledge symbolically and directly. This cognitive ability allows individuals critically to analyze people’s behaviors that they have witnessed within their environment through a process of symbolization, self-regulation, self-reflection, and vicarious learning. Individuals interpret the meaning of the behaviors or events they have witnessed (symbolization), evaluate the behavior based on its potential for producing a desired outcome (self-regulation), reflect on the behavior to determine their ability to emulate it successfully (self-reflection), and analyze and code observed behaviors as a blueprint for future actions (vicarious learning) (Bandura, 1986). Flamand (2017) argued while there is merit in the influence of some of these cognitive exercises in determining individuals’ behavior, it fails to account for the role of hormonal and biological processes in determining individuals’ behavior.

A second criticism of SCT is that it is not a unified theory. The theory is considered too broad and has many parts to it that may not be connected. For example, Betz (2007) has argued that research has not been able to identify any connection between observational learning and self-efficacy; a person’s observation of an activity does not necessarily translate into the person’s self-efficacy to carry out that activity. Furthermore, some researchers have argued that because the SCT has many parts, it is difficult to integrate into one full explanation that encompasses learning and personality (Betz, 2007; Flamand, 2017). The theory’s complex structure presents

challenges to implementing it as a whole in a study. As a result, many researchers focus on parts of SCT such as self-efficacy in their research (Beattie et al., 2015; Gong et al., 2009) rather than incorporating the whole theory.

A third criticism is that aspects of the SCT are still considered to be in a preliminary stage, thus leading to different hypotheses of the relationship among theory components such as behavior, environment, personality, and social cognition. According to Betz (2007), certain aspects of the SCT are still in their preliminary stages because of the paucity of studies on them; thus, the findings made from these studies can be considered only hypotheses until more studies are conducted to confirm initial findings. For instance, Betz (2007) mentioned that studies on the effects of physiological arousal, vicarious learning, and access to performance accomplishments have mainly been conducted with male participants. Therefore, a need for similar studies with female participants to confirm and refine findings exist (Betz, 2007).

A final criticism of the SCT is that there is a lack of clear distinction between some of the concepts of the theory. Researchers found Bandura's distinction between the concepts of self-efficacy and outcome expectations to be misleading (Eastman & Marzillier, 1984) and too closely related (Kazdin, 1978). Bandura (1978) addressed these concerns by explaining that critics were misinterpreting his definition of efficacy, and he clarified that outcomes are dependent on behavior. Bandura further addressed this criticism by refining his definition of self-efficacy over the years.

Chapter Summary

A review of the literature reveals multiple risks to student academic achievement, including parents, mentors, peers, school factors, and economical accounts (Burke & Sass, 2013; Hawes & Plourde, 2005; Liu, 2013). Several factors beyond the basic curriculum contribute to

adolescents' academic achievement or lack thereof. Many Black male students experience challenges beyond those of the typical adolescent (Dahl & Lochner, 2012). Some Black males are troubled by low socioeconomic circumstances, reduced opportunities, and excessive imprisonment (Neal & Rick, 2014). Because of family history, some Black males enter the adult world in high-poverty and politically emasculated (Engle & Black, 2008). Kafele (2012) suggested that problems begin before Black males enter school. The consequences of low academic performance in school can evolve into disproportionate special education referrals, involvement in the criminal system, and academic disengagement (Neal & Rick, 2014). These consequences of inferior academic performance faced by Black male students present a crucial educational matter that must be addressed (Dahl & Lochner, 2012; Reeves & Halikias, 2017).

There is relatively little research on the lived experiences of Black male middle school students and their perceptions of factors that influence their academic achievement. Research has extensively identified the disparity in Black male students' academic achievement as compared to other races and genders (Reeves & Halikias, 2017). Although similar in performance to Latino students on some assessments, Black male students continue to experience academic gaps vaster than other races (Reeves & Halikias, 2017). However, in some high-poverty schools, Black males have experienced academic success similar to that of other males and females from different ethnicities. These exceptions then raise the question of what contributing factors support or impede academic achievement for Black males who live in high-poverty areas.

This qualitative phenomenological study was designed to explore Black males' lived experiences relative to their academic performance. Phenomenological research seeks to discover the meaning of human experiences (Creswell, 2013). The study also used the SCT as a theoretical framework that provided insights into understanding how personal, behavioral, and

environmental factors relate to academic achievement. It is essential that educators gain insight from the lived experiences of achieving Black male middle school students to understand how to intervene and effectively assist struggling Black male students, as well as continue to support succeeding Black males (Gest & Rodkin, 2011). Relevant literature related to this qualitative study has been reviewed in Chapter 2. Areas that were reviewed were related to socioeconomic, environmental, and personal factors that characterize the background of Black male students and are known to influence their academic achievement. Also reviewed in the chapter were SCT and pertinent areas such as its development, major constructs, criticisms, and its applicability as the theoretical framework for the study.

Chapter 3: Procedures and Methods

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of select Black male students who have been academically successful at a high-poverty, rural middle school in the Southern United States. To accomplish this purpose, the study sought to answer the following topic-based central research question: What are the lived experiences of academically successful Black male students in a high-poverty, rural middle school in the Southern United States? Specifically, the study sought to answer the following secondary sub-questions that were developed based on Bandura's SCT:

RQ1: What factors in the educational environment do Black male students in a high-poverty, rural middle school identify as supportive to academic achievement?

RQ2: What behaviors do Black male students in a high-poverty rural middle school perceive as supportive to their academic achievement?

RQ3: What personal factors do Black male students in a high-poverty rural middle school perceive as supportive to their academic achievement?

This chapter begins with an overview of the qualitative paradigm and how the study aligns with it. The overview also covers the strengths and weaknesses of the qualitative paradigm and extends to a justification of my choice of interpretive phenomenology as the study's research design. Next is a description of the study's data source, including details of the selected site and its population, followed by a description of the research population, participants, and method for participant selection. This chapter also addresses the ethical issues and permissions for the study, followed by an examination of the data sources, a description of the research protocols and instrumentation, and field testing of the study's interview protocol. The chapter also covers the details of the data collection procedures. Additionally, it covers my positionality, measures I

implemented to ensure trustworthiness and rigor in the study, and techniques that were used for data analysis. Finally, the chapter concludes with a summary of the major issues covered and how they align with the problem, purpose, research questions, and theoretical framework used in the study.

Research Design

The purpose of this study, which was to explore the lived experiences of academically successful Black male students in a high-poverty rural middle school in the Southern United States, aligned with a qualitative research design. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research allows participants to tell their stories, thereby allowing for an understanding of a phenomena by exploring people's experiences and the meaning of those experiences. According to Patton (2015), "Qualitative inquiry is fundamentally about capturing, appreciating, and making sense of diverse perspectives" (Patton, 2015, p. xiii). Thus, qualitative research enables researchers to interpret human behaviors from the viewpoint of those who have experienced them (Aagaard, 2016).

Data collection in qualitative research includes characteristic methods, such as interviews, observations, and document analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Unlike quantitative research, which attempts to remain objective via numerical data, qualitative research is subjective in its interpretation of data derived from real-world experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hussain et al., 2013; Leung, 2015). Thus, in this qualitative study, I played an active role in both administering data collection methods and in interpreting the data collected. By prompting participants to divulge and share their experiences for a thorough understanding of the phenomenon under study, a qualitative research design was necessary for this study as it explored the lived experiences of select academically successful Black male students and their

perceptions of the factors that contributed to their academic success.

Qualitative research design has its strengths, weaknesses, benefits, and challenges, especially when compared to quantitative research. Englander (2012) explains that in quantitative research, large data samples are usually analyzed after they have been collected in controlled settings, allowing researchers to remain unbiased in the collection of research. This process provides generalizability and enhances the validity and reliability of research results. Conversely, Denzin and Lincoln (2011) explained that in qualitative research, data on a phenomenon is collected in its natural settings, providing an opportunity for those experiencing the phenomenon to articulate the meaning, values, and beliefs they attach to the phenomenon. Creswell (2009) described qualitative research as “an intricate fabric composed of small threads, many colors, different textures, and various blends of material” (Creswell, 2009, p. 35) that makes up the phenomenon under study. Thus, one strength of qualitative research is that it allows for the inclusion of multiple perspectives and factors to create a more holistic view of the phenomenon under study.

Another strength of qualitative research is that it provides deep, rich, and substantive data collection (Giorgi, 2009), which allows for thick, rich descriptions of the phenomenon being investigated (Merriam, 2009). Qualitative findings lie in the collection of three kinds of data: interviews, observations, and documentation (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). Conducting interviews in a natural setting creates an atmosphere for one-on-one exchanges in the setting where the participant experiences the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). Interviews yield direct quotations, opinions, feelings, verbal and nonverbal cues. They also yield a full scope of interpersonal and organizational processes, all of which can be observed and documented by an attentive researcher. Skillful interviewing and extensive content analysis will generate credible

qualitative findings with face validity (Patton, 2015).

Conversely, qualitative research is not devoid of weaknesses. Lack of generalizability is one weakness of qualitative research (Noble & Smith, 2015). Because of the heavy dependence on the study participants' personal beliefs, experiences, and interpretation of a phenomenon, qualitative studies are not generalizable (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Leung, 2015; Noble & Smith, 2015). To counter the subjectivity that contributes to qualitative research's lack of generalizability, researchers attempt to make the studies replicable by including detailed descriptions (Leung, 2015; Noble & Smith, 2015). A second weakness of qualitative research is the dominant role the researcher plays in interpreting the data, which calls into question the veracity of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Leung, 2015). To combat this lack of veracity, researchers conduct a process called triangulation, a validation strategy by which the researcher uses a variety of data sources to confirm the veracity of collected information (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Additionally, there are several challenges in adopting a phenomenological approach to research (Englander, 2016), as this study did. First, this approach requires researchers to have knowledge and understanding of philosophical assumptions. Furthermore, being able to identify assumptions in one's own research study can be a complex undertaking because assumptions could be abstract, and as a result, difficult to identify in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, researcher predispositions and knowledge about a phenomenon must be put aside to focus on questioning the participants (Giorgi, 2009; Zografou, 2012). Despite these cautions and based on the strengths itemized above, I selected qualitative research with a phenomenological approach as the most appropriate approach for the study.

Phenomenology

According to Creswell (2013), qualitative methodology has five different approaches used to explore a phenomenon: narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study research. Phenomenology is grounded in several disciplines, including education, psychology, and sociology (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 2014). Phenomenological research, the interpretation of a phenomenon explained by individuals who live it (Creswell, 2013), is a well-established approach to qualitative inquiry through which a researcher attempts to express the meaning of a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). After contemplating all qualitative approaches, I decided upon a phenomenological study that explored the experiences of select academically successful Black male students and their perceptions of factors that contributed to their academic success.

An important characteristic of phenomenological study is the possibility for rich descriptions of the essential or invariant structures of an experience (Aagaard, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Central to phenomenological research are the actors' perspectives (Aspers, 2009); an actor's perspective is the "mental directness" that guides the researcher to discovery (Aspers, 2009; Creswell, 2003). Per Lichtman (2013), phenomenological research considers the lived experiences of those who have experienced a phenomenon. The primary use of interviews as a data collection tool allows this research method to elicit and provide rich descriptions of the lived experiences of individuals with the phenomenon (Creswell, 2014).

Phenomenological inquiry was identified as the most appropriate research approach for this study because this approach explores the contextual meaning of the phenomena being researched (Creswell, 2009) by focusing on the personal accounts of people who have experienced the phenomenon in question (Aagaard, 2016). The purpose of this research study

was to explore the lived experiences of select Black male students who have been academically successful in a high-poverty rural middle school in the Southern United States. The use of the phenomenological research approach enabled me to achieve the purpose of the study by gaining a clearer understanding of issues confronted by Black male students in middle school as they seek educational goals in rural, high-poverty environments. The discourse of academically successful Black males is paramount to support other Black male students because it provides insights into how these academically successful students have been able to navigate and succeed in the same settings as lower achievers. Data collected from this study provided intricate, detailed information that descriptively highlighted the phenomena observed. Research participants, through interviews, revealed explicit details about their experiences in response to the research questions, and their varied perspectives were identified as the participants shared their individual stories.

There are two dominant approaches of phenomenological research: interpretive and descriptive (Englander, 2012; Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Interpretive phenomenology gives individuals a voice as well as comprehends how subjects interpret their experiences (Ritchie et al., 2014), whereas a descriptive phenomenological investigation presents a theoretical model that represents the essential structures of the phenomenon under study (Swanson et al., 2012). Unlike descriptive phenomenology, interpretive phenomenology accepts that the beliefs and understanding of the phenomenon will not be excluded from the study (Swanson et al., 2012).

Descriptive Phenomenology. Amedeo P. Giorgi developed descriptive phenomenology as a qualitative approach to psychological studies (Englander, 2016). Giorgi suggested individuals are of a historical nature, in that their comprehensive being is part of their constitution as a whole. Thus, our individual actions are distinctive and, in totality, a constitution

to wholeness (Giorgi, 2009). Descriptive phenomenology considers both time and space when describing an experience, but it does not consider the context within which a phenomenon took place (Giorgi, 2019).

According to Giorgi (2009), obtaining concrete and detailed descriptions from the people who have experienced a phenomenon is the initial step in the empirical research process. Descriptive phenomenology emphasizes individuals' perspectives and allows them to provide their lived experiences without manipulation (Giorgi, 2009); as such, a researcher's ability to maintain the voice of the research participants without altering participants' views is critical to the research findings. Lastly, a primary concern in descriptive phenomenological inquiry is subjectivity; thus, I included the reactions and behaviors of participants during data analysis (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003).

Interpretive Phenomenology. The aim of interpretive phenomenology is to provide an in-depth analysis of participants' lived experiences and the interaction and interpretation of those experiences. It is both exploratory and interpretive in that it allows the discovery of common themes. Thus, interpretive phenomenology guided me to make sense of participants' experiences (Alase, 2017). Unlike descriptive phenomenology that focuses on the essence of the experience, interpretive phenomenology holds a theoretical obligation to an individual's cognitive, linguistic, affective, and physical being (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Descriptive phenomenology presupposes an association among an individual's communication, thoughts, and emotional state simultaneously. Conversely, interpretive phenomenology researchers understand this association is complex—individuals struggle to articulate their thoughts and emotions, possibly due to information they do not wish to disclose (Noon, 2018). Researchers also understand they must interpret individuals' mental and emotional state from the information articulated (Smith & Osborn,

2007). Thus, interpretive phenomenology researchers focus on understanding and interpreting the meaning of their participants' experiences by engaging in extensive thematic analysis (Sloan & Bowe, 2014).

This study employed interpretive phenomenology to examine the lived experiences of middle school Black males in the Southern United States. Creswell (2009) confirmed that qualitative research seeks information and its meaning in order to reveal life experiences through data collection and an analysis of patterns of emerging themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Using interpretive phenomenology, I explored how middle school Black males perceived and made sense of the experiences relating to their academic achievement; study participants explained how they made sense of their personal and social worlds, and I interpreted what was seen, heard, and understood.

Interpretive phenomenology is grounded in hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation. Essentially, human interpretation leads to making sense of life experiences (Noon, 2018; Sloan & Bowe, 2014; Smith & Osborn, 2007). Researchers act as a "double hermeneutic" via two states of interpretive analysis: (a) the hermeneutics of empathy and (b) the hermeneutics of questioning (Smith et al., 2009); thus, they have the two-fold mission of making sense of a particular phenomenon and interpreting the participants' understanding of that phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). The two states allowed me to view each participant's viewpoint with both an empathetic eye as well as one which examines what is being articulated. Largely, a researcher's access to the phenomenon is through the information participants share, but by having access to the participants' view of phenomena, I also saw through the eyes of the participants, thereby gaining an understanding of the phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009).

Phenomenological Perspective. Four phenomenological philosophers--Husserl,

Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre--are contributors to the ideas of how to examine and understand lived experiences (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Each philosopher contributed distinctively to the approach, and their contributions evolved into the phenomenological approach that exists currently. Husserl believed that phenomenology requires a careful examination and understanding of how individuals come to understand their own experiences of a specific phenomenon (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). For Husserl, an experience takes place in the conscious. His belief was that individuals have a limited perspective with everyday experiences and take them for granted; thus, Husserl sought to understand how objects are portrayed and experienced in human consciousness (Sloan & Bowe, 2014).

Heidegger benefited from the tutelage of Husserl. However, Heidegger's philosophy about interpretive phenomenology varied slightly from Husserl's philosophy. While Husserl focused on the abstractness of the world, Heidegger focused on the possibility of what exists and the meaningfulness of the world (Sloan & Bowe, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). Heidegger believed that individuals cannot be neutral in their experiences of a phenomenon and that meaning can be derived from an analysis of the way individuals use language to describe their experience of the phenomenon. This phenomenological perspective contributes to the understanding of how human beings exist among a world of relationships, objects, and languages. It also contributes to the interpretation of those relationships, hence the interpretive aspect of interpretive phenomenology (Sloan & Bowe, 2014; Smith et al., 2009).

Merleau-Ponty (1982) endorsed both Husserl's and Heidegger's perspectives about being in the world; however, he posited that every individual's viewpoint varied. How one person embodies experiences is not necessarily a shared view. In turn, individuals will not totally empathize with other individual experiences. Interpretive phenomenological researchers benefit

from Merleau-Ponty's explanation of how humans view themselves as being in communication with the world versus being within it (Merleau-Ponty, 1982).

Sartre embraced the works of Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty (Spiegelberg, 1971). Sartre added that human experience is an evolving process, as individuals are in a continuous process of becoming who they are. Sartre suggested that individuals' perceptions of how they see the world is intentional and dependent upon what they deem to be absent and what they deem to be present in the world (Spiegelberg, 1971). This complex view considers the personal and social relationships of individuals and how they see their experiences in various ways—morally, interpersonally, and affectively (Spiegelberg, 1971).

Interpretive phenomenology highlights the significance of participants' experiences and relationships, the meanings they associate with those relationships, and their perceptions of the world--both the seen and the unseen. Interpretive phenomenology is the appropriate research design for this research study because it allowed me to interpret and make sense of the phenomenon of achievement from the perception of academically successful middle school Black males and to make sense of the meanings these participants give to the phenomenon via interviews and observations (Creswell, 1998). Interpretive phenomenology encourages the choice of individuals who have experiences with the phenomenon, which aligns with this study's focus on academically successful middle school Black males as most appropriate for offering rich, detailed descriptions of their experiences with overcoming academic barriers in a high-poverty rural middle school in the Southern United States. Interpretive phenomenology also recommends the use of in-depth interviews and observations as a means of collecting data on the experiences of individuals regarding a phenomenon. This recommendation aligns with my choice to use open-ended "what" questions that elicit insightful details about the participants'

experiences with overcoming academic barriers. Furthermore, this recommendation aligns with my use of observations to explain and verify the information participants provide regarding their experiences. Selecting interpretive phenomenology as the study's research design allowed me to understand and analyze the educational environmental factors, behaviors, and personal factors that these students identify as responsible for their academic successes. The knowledge gained from these students could serve as a bridge to overcome the academic barriers faced by other middle school Black males and eventually help to reframe the narrative of Black male students as low academic performers.

Site Selection

The site selected for this study, Success Heights School, is a rural middle school in the Southern United States with a large population of high-poverty students. Both Success Heights School and the Success Heights School District exemplify what it means to be labeled a Title I school. These schools are federally funded to help students from high-poverty backgrounds achieve their educational goals (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Success Heights School is located in Southern Alabama with a population of 3,783 at the time of the study. The population had decreased by 14% from 2014 to 2015. The ethnic make-up of the county at the time of the study was 64.1% Caucasian, 31.3% African American, 1.1% Hispanic or Latino, 3.1% American Indian and Native American, 0.3% Asian, and 1.2% Other. The median household income for residents living within the city limits was \$17,700, an income which represents a 5.15% decline from 2015 to 2016. The median property value was \$78,500. In 2015, 160 citizens graduated from the local technical college. Many of the graduates were Caucasian.

Success Heights School is also a magnet school that provides competitive educational opportunities to high-poverty students from different school districts. At the time of the study,

Success Heights School was the first magnet school in Alabama with a fully integrated STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics) curriculum. The school served students in grades six through nine with an academic climate consisting of interest-based enrichment programs such as piano, choir, technology, and foreign language. Students were offered free tutoring as well. Together, the student and scholastic organizations improved the quality of school life and gave students an opportunity to participate in several educational programs.

At the time of the study, Success Heights School served 103 students, a relatively small student enrollment, with the student demographics being 86.7% African American, 14.1% Caucasian, and 0.009% Korean. The average student-to-teacher class ratio was 15:1. The Success Heights School staff consisted of 15 employees who were approximately 38% Caucasian and 62% African American, and the school was led by a Black female principal with 16 years of administrative experience and 24 total years of experience in public education. The principal's highest educational qualification is that of education specialist. All teachers were teaching in their field of certification. Other staff included a part-time media specialist, a part-time special education teacher, a physical education teacher, a custodian, and two support personnel who taught arts.

Success Heights School was selected as the site for the study for various reasons. At the time of the study, Success Heights School was a Title I magnet school that catered to students of all socioeconomic statuses, especially those from high-poverty backgrounds, the target population for the study. Success Heights was appropriate for this study because the study required all study participants to meet specific academic and behavioral qualifications, such as a B average and a maximum of two or fewer discipline referrals. These high academic and

behavioral qualifications required of students ensured that I had a pool of potential participants who could answer the study's research questions about the educational factors, environmental factors, behavioral factors, and personal factors that they identified as responsible for their academic successes.

Permission to conduct research and gain access to the study participants' records was gained from the school district superintendent. As an employee in the school district, I was aware of the superintendent's email. I contacted him through his work email, and he responded with an email. Emails of district personnel are also available on the school district's website. Initial permission to conduct the research at the site was received on February 20, 2017; a letter of permission was granted again on April 4, 2019 (Appendix A). Next, I completed the human subjects research training (Appendix B) on February 26, 2017, and then I received institutional review board (IRB) permission in April 2019 (Appendix C).

Population

Roberts (2010) described the research population as a group of people who share characteristics that align with a research interest. The population for this study was middle school Black males who have been academically successful at Success Heights School, a high-poverty rural middle school in the Southern United States. At the time of the study, Success Heights School served 103 students enrolled in Grades 6–9. The student population consisted of 86.7% African American, 14.1% Caucasian, and 0.009% Korean. Of the Black students, 63.2% are females and 36.79% are males. This percentage of Black male students constituted the target population from which I selected participants for this study.

Participants

Rowley and Wright (2011) reported that the average reading and math scores for White students were in the 55th percentile while scores of Black students were in the 28th percentile. Research shows that compared to Black female students, White female students, and White male students, Black males are at the bottom of the achievement ladder in reading and math (McFarland et al., 2016; Pitre, 2014). Casserly et al. (2012) stated that economic, social, and academic factors play a significant role in the underperformance of Black male students, compounded with the emotional, physical, and social transitions these students experience in middle school (Below et al., 2010). Having study participants in the study who have experienced these same challenges and overcome these challenges was imperative. I found participants who were representative of these criteria in Success Heights School.

The participants, academically successful Black male middle school students from Success Heights School, ranged in age from 11 to 15 and were in grades six through eight. Participants were all students who had scored in the category of Average or High Average on the 2017-2018 standards-based state exams and who had a GPA of 3.0 or higher in reading and math.

Participant Selection

Selected participants for the study were chosen through purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling, or nonprobability sampling, entails choosing specific participants not randomly, but rather "based upon a certain purpose" (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003, p. 713). Patton (2015) also describes purposeful sampling as selecting only participants who can provide detailed, rich information about the research topic under study. I identified purposeful sampling as the most appropriate sampling strategy for this study because this strategy allowed the selection of only

participants who met the criteria for the study. By using this sampling strategy, I was able to select participants who provided detailed information about the specific phenomenon being studied (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Unlike quantitative research that requires many participants to create representative sample sizes, qualitative research does not require many participants but rather information-rich cases that can provide breadth and depth to the research phenomenon being studied (Aagaard, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). Creswell (2014) states that the sample size for a study is dependent upon the qualitative design being used. Qualitative studies, specifically a phenomenological study such as the current study, normally involve a small number of participants—as few as three—with the goal of reaching the point of saturation which no new data can be generated from the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Because the qualitative research design for this study was interpretive phenomenology, I selected 12 participants for the study, anticipating that the number selected would enable me to gain detailed information and insight into the phenomenon of this study from multiple perspectives (Aagaard, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). Initially, I had planned to select seven participants for the study, but I increased the number of participants to 12 upon the recommendation of my committee. I applied specific criteria I believed would help me select participants who would best meet the needs of the study. The criteria comprised the following: (a) GPA of 3.0 or higher, (b) state-reported assessment data with scores in the top two categories of scoring, and (c) enrolled in a rural school in Southern United States. I selected 12 participants who met the criteria from the Success Heights school in Grades 6 through 9 and aged 11 to 13 years.

The process of selecting participants began with my requesting and gaining access to the cumulative records of the Black male students from the Success Heights School superintendent. I reviewed the cumulative records and the state's assessment data. Then I compiled a list of all Black male students who scored a B average (80%) or higher in core classes during the 2017–2018 school year and a rating of High Average on the state's accountability measure. Qualifying students received a written invitation to participate in the study and also had to complete a self-reported demographic profile to provide additional information about themselves. The invitation letters contained information about the study's purpose, intent, and conditions of student participation; parental consent forms that requested the permission for the students' participation in the study; and informed minor assent forms to elicit the students' agreement to participate in the study (Creswell, 2013). The students returned the signed parental consent forms and signed informed minor assent forms (Appendix D). Then, through a lottery process, I assigned a number for random selection to each student who met the criteria to participate in the study. The random selection yielded 12 participants to whose parents I mailed letters that outlined the times, dates, and locations for interviews and an observation schedule. Those who volunteered but were not selected to participate in the study were mailed a written "thank you" letter expressing appreciation for volunteering and informing them and their parents that the number of participants needed for the study had been met.

Ethical Issues/Permissions

Prior to the commencement of data collection, several ethical issues and permissions that a researcher must address. Per Glesne (2016), the interpretive nature of qualitative research that requires researchers to interact repetitively with their participants warrants the need to observe certain ethical concerns. These ethical concerns are noted in the Belmont Report (1979), a

document that was created to establish ethical principles in research involving human beings. These ethical principles are beneficence, respect for persons, and justice (Belmont Report, 1979).

Beneficence emphasizes the need for the researcher not to harm participants with her research and the need for the researcher to minimize risk and maximize benefits of the research to the participants (Belmont Report, 1979). To address this principle, I ensured that I obtained permission from the school district superintendent (Appendix A) to gain access to participants' academic records. Next, I completed the human subjects research training (Appendix B). Then, I obtained IRB approval (Appendix C) from the participants' base school to conduct the research. The IRB approval was to ensure that the research would not harm the participants in the research as well as to verify the confidentiality and anonymity safeguards that I implemented to protect participants' privacy. I also attained a recorded media addendum (Appendix D) from the base school to record the interviews that I would conduct with the study participants (Belmont Report, 1979; Glesne, 2016).

Other measures related to beneficence were implemented. To protect participants' information, I secured all participant-related data by storing the data in a locked cabinet in a secure location that was accessible only to the researcher. Data collection instruments did not contain information that would readily identify participants. Each participant was assigned a study ID (a number and letter combination) prior to the collection data; the list of IDs was stored separately from data sources. Written interview data was coded to avoid having to use any identifying information. Recorded interviews and other identifying information were locked in a separate location. Access was restricted to me only. Identifiable data was encrypted. Upon completion of the study, collected data was disposed of by shredding hard copies and deleting recordings. A reasonable period for disposal is no more than 5 years (Creswell, 2014).

Respect for persons emphasizes the need for researchers to seek voluntary, informed consent from their participants prior to their participation in a study (Belmont Report, 1979; Glesne, 2016). This principle requires that the researcher be explicit about the details of the research to the participants so that participants can make informed decisions about their willingness to participate in the study (Creswell, 2014). No attempt by the researcher should be made to coerce the participants into participating in the study (Creswell, 2014). I was also obligated to protect the rights of participants with diminished autonomy (Creswell, 2014). To address this principle, in the invitation letter to parents and students, I ensured that participants were provided with an overview of the research and information about the possibility of withdrawing from the study without penalty (Glesne, 2016). The invitation letter also contained the parental consent forms, the informed minor assent forms, and the recorded media addendum (Appendix D) because the target participants were minors (11 to 13 years). Later I mailed letters that outlined the times, dates, and locations for interviews and an observation schedule to the participants and their parents. Prior to commencing the interviews, I reiterated to the participants that participation in the study was voluntary and that the participants could withdraw at any time during the study without any consequences.

Justice requires that the researcher treat each participant fairly by distributing equitably the burdens and benefits of the research among all participants (Belmont Report, 1979; Glesne, 2016). To address this principle, I ensured that I selected participants based on the selection criteria created. I compiled a tally of prospective participants who met the academic criteria of a B average (80%) or higher in core classes during the 2017–2018 school year and a rating of High Average on the state's accountability measure. Further, I assigned a number for random selection to each prospective student through a lottery process. Only the students whose numbers were

randomly selected during the lottery process participated in the study. This type of participant selection ensured that I was not biased in the selection of the participants, thus adhering to an equitable distribution of burdens and benefits of the research among all participants (Belmont Report, 1979; Glesne, 2016).

Data Sources

Qualitative research involves the use of many data sources including observations, interviews, documents, and audiovisual materials (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Glesne, 2016; Patton, 2015). The choice of data sources is dependent on the study's purpose, research questions, and research design (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Glesne, 2016; Patton, 2015). Because the purpose of this qualitative interpretive phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of select Black male students who have been academically successful at a high-poverty rural middle school in the Southern United States, I selected documents, interviews, and observations as the sources of data.

Documents

The use of documents in qualitative research is often relegated to supplementing observations and interviews; however, documents can provide contextual and historical background pertinent to understanding a topic under study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Documents can be categorized into three types: official, personal, and popular culture (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Official documents include reports and handbooks. Personal documents include personal journals and blogs. Popular culture documents include magazines and photographs on the public domain (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

For this study, I gathered preliminary data from documents in the form of cumulative records and assessment dashboards. These documents enabled me to gain access to participants'

records after gaining permission from the school district superintendent to conduct the research at the study site. The preliminary data gathered from these documents were instrumental in identifying all the Black male students who scored in the range of proficient or exceeding on the 2017–2018 standards-based state exams and had a GPA of 3.0 or higher in reading and math. A self-reported demographic profile was another document that provided additional information about participants and helped to identify participants who closely matched the criteria for selection. I randomly selected the participants for the study from this group.

A challenge to using documents as a data source is gaining access to them (Marshall & Rossman, 2015). The permission gained from the school superintendent served as a means of gaining access to the cumulative records and assessment dashboard that provided information about students that would otherwise be restricted. Another concern associated with using documents as a data source is the possibility of bias from the creator of the documents (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Given that these documents were official academic records, I trusted their veracity.

Interviews

Interviews were the primary source of data for this study. Interviewing served as the method most necessary to uncover the participants' experiences with educational, environmental, behavioral, and personal factors that were supportive to their academic achievement. Qualitative interviews seek qualitative knowledge as expressed in everyday language and take place in a naturalistic setting (Creswell, 2013; Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). Per Kvale and Brinkman (2009), "Qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the subjects' points of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world proof to scientific explanations" (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, p. 1). The three types of interview structures are

structured, unstructured, and semi-structured (Lune & Berg, 2017). Structured interviews use closed-ended, pre-set questions with no deviation irrespective of the interviewee; structured interviews are suitable for gathering factual data. Unstructured interviews are conversational and topical in nature with the researcher giving the interviewee leeway to lead the discussion; these interviews are suitable for gaining clarity on an event or a topic. Unstructured interviews use open-ended questions that guide the researcher's line of questioning during an interview and enable the researcher to rephrase and expand the questions to probe further into the interviewees' responses (Bernard & Ryan, 2010).

Semi-structured interviews were selected for this research study because this type of interview provided the most flexibility for eliciting in-depth information while providing some guidance to the interview (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I used open-ended questions from an interview protocol (Appendix E) to guide the conversation with participants regarding their experience with the phenomenon (Giorgi, 2009). The in-depth interviews I conducted yielded rich, detailed information from the participants' perspectives.

An advantage to using in-depth, semi-structured, open-ended interviews was the flexibility these interviews provided for initiating conversation with participants by asking them simple and open-ended questions to understand and record participants' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In a one-on-one setting, each participant was asked to provide narratives of their experiences with detailed responses to each of the questions. Additionally, each participant had the opportunity to reflect upon all questions prior to audio recording. This preparation time aided in easing potential anxiety and thus prompted more meaningful responses (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). Kvale and Brinkman (2009) asserted that interviews give children a voice to understanding their world. Through interviews, I gained an understanding of how academically

successful Black male middle school students, particularly those residing in economically deprived areas with limited resources, have been able to overcome the barriers that other Black male students face.

A disadvantage of using interviews is that inconsistencies may be present between participants' answers and their practices (Alshenqeeti, 2014). Sometimes, participants might not mention information or practices that may be pertinent to understanding the academic success of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Such inconsistencies were addressed through observations, and the additional information was another data source used for this study.

Observations

The last data source used for this research study was observations. Qualitative observations require the researcher to take notes on the behavior of participants at the research site (Creswell, 2014) and record the occurrence of an event as the event happens (Glesne, 2016). When conducting observations, researchers can choose to be nonparticipant observers or participant observers, or researchers can transition from the former to the latter (Bernard, 2011; Patton, 2015). Per Creswell (2013), nonparticipant observers maintain the position of a distant outsider in their observations, taking notes without any direct involvement. If a role change is needed, nonparticipant observers can change to a participant observer role, which may help the observer gain subjective data (Creswell, 2013) but also limit them from recording written data. I chose to be a nonparticipant observer for this research study.

I conducted daily observations consisting of 20-minute sessions three days a week over a six-month period using the eProve eleot 2.0 classroom observation tool. I chose to observe during any class period or any gym period at all times during the school day. Also, field notes were collected in a field diary to chronicle observations and my own thoughts, feelings,

experiences, and perceptions throughout the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The field diary, organized by time and date, included a line down the middle of the page that separated descriptive notes (i.e., participant's portrait, dialogue, description of physical setting, events, and activities) from reflection notes (i.e., the researcher's thoughts, prejudices, and feelings; Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Like every data source, observation has its advantages. Creswell (2014) stated that the advantages of observation include having a firsthand experience with the participant, recording information as it occurs, and noting the unexpected as it occurs during the observation. Observations are useful when participants are uncomfortable about explaining topics that can be observed. Qualitative observations require the researcher to take notes on the behavior of individuals at the research site (Creswell, 2014). The field notes for this study are the records of activities I saw the participants engage in; field notes can supplement or support information that participants revealed during their interviews, thus providing valuable insight during data analysis (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Observations also have limitations. For instance, because the observer is not a part of the natural setting, they may seem intrusive and thus alter the setting in subtle ways. I addressed this limitation by being as unobtrusive as possible; I sat quietly in the back of the classroom and was careful not to disrupt the class. Another disadvantage to using observation is the inexperience of the researcher, which may result in the researcher's inability to document every aspect of the observation. I addressed this disadvantage by implementing observation guidelines such as using a field diary, which was organized by time and date, with each page divided to distinguish descriptive notes (i.e., participant's portrait, dialogue, description of physical setting, events, and activities) from reflection notes (i.e., the researcher's thoughts, prejudices, and feelings)

(Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The use of the field diary helped me stay organized during the observations, which improved the quality of my observation notes (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

All of the sources of data used in this study were critical to the study. GPA and assessment scores indicated the academic achievement level of the students and helped narrow down qualifying participants for the final selection process. Interview data provided details of the students' lived experiences relative to supportive factors that impacted their academic achievement. Finally, observations enabled me to record information and practices that were not mentioned during the interviews, as well as to corroborate information the participants provided.

Description of Research Protocols/Instrumentation

Based on the purpose and the research questions of the study, I identified semi-structured, qualitative interviews as the primary tool for data collection in this research study. To facilitate effective data collection using this data collection tool, I developed an interview protocol. The protocol included a list of questions emanating from the study's research questions; furthermore, the interview protocol provided procedural guidelines to help direct the interview and elicit the most information from participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). Creswell and Poth (2018) advised that the questions in the interview protocol be phrased simply to enable participants to understand and answer in detail.

I created the interview protocol (Appendix E) directly related to the theoretical constructs of Bandura's (1986) SCT and the purpose of the study. Patton (1982) suggested that conducting interviews serves the researcher's purpose of identifying participants' inner feelings, discerning participants' perceptions, and understanding what cannot be observed. I ensured that I designed the questions in the interview protocol to evoke responses analogous to the academic journey.

The interview protocol included both introductory and in-depth questions designed to provide preliminary information, to facilitate comfort between the participant and the interviewer, and to generate data (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009).

The first section of the interview protocol served as an introduction to the interview and elicited information about each student's demographics and academic performance. This first section did not include numbers and sought participants' understanding of achievement. This question provided the context necessary to understand each participant's answers. The second section of the interview protocol addressed RQ1 and spanned Questions 1–11. This section addressed areas related to the environmental factors that affected participants' behaviors, such as their social network and class experiences. The third section of the interview protocol addressed RQ2 and spanned Questions 12–23. This section addressed participants' behavioral experiences and how those behavioral experiences related to participants' academic achievement. The fourth section of the interview protocol addressed RQ3 and spanned Questions 24–32. This section addressed participants' personal experiences, specifically personal factors that the participants deemed as supportive to their academic achievement. The interview protocol concluded with a closing question that solicited participants' advice to their peers who may be struggling academically.

I ensured that all the questions in the interview protocol were open-ended in keeping with the decision to conduct a semi-structured interview. To ensure consistency, I asked each participant the same open-ended interview questions; however, additional semi-structured probing questions emerged as participants responded. The semi-structured, open-ended format of the interview protocol allowed me to lead participants to provide more in-depth data about experiences at home, in school, and in other settings (Creswell, 2014). Interviews lasted on

average for about 60 minutes.

Another source of data utilized in data collection was observations. Per Creswell and Poth (2018), researchers should use an observation protocol “for guiding and recording observational data” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 325). For this study, I used the eProve eleot 2.0 (Appendix F), for which I received training and certification after passing an online assessment. The observation tool was designed by Cognia (n.d.), formerly known as AdvancEd, to recognize observable practices that promoted learning within a classroom environment. The tool was appropriate for this study because it was student-centric and sought to identify learning contexts that were most conducive to helping students engage better in the classroom (Cognia, n.d.). Written permission to use the eProve eleot 2.0 was granted by Cognia after an External Research Agreement was submitted (Appendix H). The agreement required an explanation of my research study’s description of data collection activities and a list of surveys, inventories, and instruments requested to utilize in my research.

The eProve eleot 2.0 classroom observation tool is comprised of 28 items organized in seven environments (Cognia, n.d.). It is based on a review of widely-used observation instruments and the most current research on effective learning. The eProve eleot 2.0 provides useful, relevant, structured, and quantifiable data on the extent to which students are engaged in activities and/or demonstrate knowledge, attitudes, and/or dispositions that are conducive to effective learning (eProve eleot, n.d., para 1).

The observation tool contains seven indicators and several descriptors under each. Indicators include (a) equitable learning environment, (b) high expectations environment, (c) supportive environment, (d) active learning, (e) progress monitoring and feedback, (f) well-managed environment, and (g) digital learning environment (Cognia, n.d.). The tool is designed

to look for observable student behaviors within the indicators, such as students' interactions with peers, discussions with peers and teachers, demonstration of work quality, behavior, response to feedback, respect toward peers, ease in learning complex concepts, rule adherence, behavior expectations, and other areas (Cognia, n.d.). The observation protocol has a rating scale of numbers ranging from 1–4 that represent the level of performance observed; the values attached to each number in the rating scale are as follows: 1 = *not observed*, 2 = *somewhat evident*, 3 = *evident class*, 4 = *very evident* (Cognia, n.d.).

The original developer of eProve eleot 2.0 is Cognia External Review Team. The Review Team's goal was to develop a tool that focused on classroom environment elements conducive to learning. The eProve eleot 2.0 is aligned with the Standards for Quality Schools. This tool is different because it has asynchronous training models and an online inter-rater reliability certification process. Observers are not required to gather additional evidence from the students after an observation, but it is encouraged and recommended to gain more evidence to inform the observer's rating. The eProve eleot 2.0 is useful for formative evaluations and reflective evaluations. By providing an aggregate picture of classrooms across the school district or individual schools, observers can gather data longitudinally or based upon the specific standards. A system-wide analysis is available in reports and exporting data. The observation tool is student-centric, yet through data collection, student engagement can inform observers on the level of teacher planning and performance.

Utilizing analysis data of over 45,000 classroom observations, a team of educators developed the eProve eleot 2.0 as a measure of effective teacher practice. The eProve eleot 2.0 provides accurate results and is a valid and reliable tool. To ensure that observations meet

stringent criteria and ensure ethical use, Cognia follows the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing.

Overall reliability and validity related to test content, response processes, and construct validity are gained through data collected from over 45,000 classroom observations. Face validity is established by experts who judge the theoretical relationship between the seven environments and the 30 description items of those environments. Information regarding reliability includes the following:

The overall reliability of the measure is .94 using Cronbach's Alpha, which is considered a very strong level of reliability. To assess construct validity, a confirmatory factor analysis of the measure reveals the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) as .068 indicating an adequate fit of the model to the data. (Cognia, n.d., para 1).

Although the eProve eleot 2.0 classroom observation tool is designed to observe an entire class of students, I utilized it to observe only the research participants. I rated the participants using the eProve eleot 2.0 inbuilt rating scale; in the notes section of the tool, descriptive notes supported my rationale for the rating that I gave each indicator observed. I also used a field diary in addition to the eProve eleot 2.0 classroom observation tool. I designed the field diary to mimic the observation protocol form described by Creswell and Poth (2018) in their textbook. The field diary comprised of two columns: one for descriptions of the events the researcher witnessed and the other for the researcher's reflections. I chose to use the field diary because I intended to conduct six months' worth of observation and knew a form would not be able to contain the amount of data I would gather (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Within the descriptive column, I noted information such as the participants' portraits, dialogue, descriptions of physical setting, events, and activities that occurred during the observation. Within the reflections column, I noted my

thoughts, prejudices, and feelings related to the events and activities I observed (Creswell, 2013). Each observation lasted on average for an hour.

Field Testing

Cognia recommends that all users of their eProve eleot 2.0 be certified for validity and reliability of observations. Certification is a requirement of all Cognia review processes, including external accreditation, diagnostic, and special reviews. Completing the certification process is a requirement of the school district by which I am employed. Each eProve eleot 2.0 license includes in-depth training with both text and video examples. To become eProve eleot 2.0 certified, trainees must complete a 20-minute virtual classroom observation provided in the online certification course. Trainees must obtain a minimum of .90 agreement with expert ratings. After the certification course, observers gain knowledge and the skill level to conduct valid and reliable observations using eProve eleot 2.0 and accurately rate each item in the seven environments with less observer bias.

The interview protocol was field tested in two ways. The protocol was submitted to doctoral committee members for evaluation of validity and reliability measures, including construct and face validity. Construct validity measures how a construct has been operationalized in the interview protocol, whereas face validity determines if the interview protocol would elicit the desired information for which it was designed (Colton & Covert, 2007). I worked extensively with my methodologist on the interview protocol to ensure that the questions aligned with the study's research questions. I incorporated all the feedback I received from my doctoral committee. Second, I field tested the interview protocol with two nonparticipants from Success Heights School who met the participant selection criteria: (a) GPA of 3.0 or higher, (b) state-reported assessment data with scores in the top two categories of scoring, and (c) enrollment in a

rural school in the Southern United States (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The two nonparticipants were demographically similar to the study's participants, and they received the same letters of consent for parents to sign granting their consent for their children's participation. During the field test session, the nonparticipants were asked the study's interview questions; based on the field test participants' responses and feedback, I determined their level of understanding of each question and modified questions when necessary (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Dikko, 2016). For example, if the field-test participants struggled with a response, I asked the question in an alternative way, one which would more likely be understood by the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Dikko, 2016). Once it was determined that the modified question was met with an in-depth, articulate, and thoughtful response, I made notations that the modified question was valid for the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). During the interviews, the study's participants were asked questions as originally written, followed with the modified question if they lacked understanding of the question. A follow-up question was written if responses did not indicate a clear understanding of the question.

The pilot test process provides an opportunity to assist with clarifying some questions (Gani et al., 2020). I found that some questions were insufficient to answer the research questions. For example, questions that began with "Who" were changed to "How" or "What" questions. Questions were revised as follows: How would you describe the neighborhood where you are growing up? When you answer this question, you can focus on the people, family, organization, or anything else significant when you think about where you live. The question was changed to two questions: What support do you receive from your friends toward your education generally and academic work specifically? What support do you receive from your parents toward your education generally and toward your academic work specifically? The questions

were modified to ensure the quality of the interview data. Some changes were made with vocabulary. The questions were revised to be more explicit and student-friendly. Some interview questions under the “personal experiences” heading were changed during the pilot process due to students’ difficulty with responding. For example, one question was “Self-efficacy is the belief in yourself and your ability to succeed. It is similar to confidence. Do your feelings of self-efficacy prevent you from accepting grades lower than a B?” Changes were made to ensure the participants understood the question. The pilot test process is completed to validate interview questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). There was a limitation in the pilot test process because it involved the participation of two pilot participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This limitation did not affect the validity of the protocol as the pilot participants represented the population chosen to participate in the study. The findings obtained through the pilot test and methodologist were sufficient to conduct interviews with actual study participants.

Data Collection Procedures

I collected data for this study through documents, semi-structured interviews, and observations. Prior to collecting data, I sought permission from the school district superintendent (Appendix A) to conduct the research study and to gain access to the student records stored at the school. I received the initial permission to gain access to the site on February 20, 2017, but this permission was later updated on April 4, 2019. Next, I completed the human subjects research training (Appendix B) on February 26, 2017, and then I received IRB permission in April 2019 (Appendix C).

After gaining access to the site, I was able to gather data on potential participants for the study through students’ cumulative records and state assessment data. My participants’ selection was based on established criteria consisting of the following: (a) GPA of 3.0 or higher, (b) state-

reported assessment data with scores in the top two categories of scoring, and (c) enrollment in a rural school in the Southern United States. With these criteria in mind, I reviewed school records to select the names of Black male middle school students who had scored in the top categories on state tests. I also reviewed research participants' cumulative end-of-the-year reading and math records from 2017–2018 to collect quantitative state assessment data. Based on the criteria for participation, I selected participants who attained a state assessment level of High Average and Average in both reading and math from state reported results and with an average of 80% or above in reading and math. A self-reported demographic profile was another document that provided additional information about participants and helped to identify participants who closely matched the criteria for selection.

Upon completion of the students' records review process, I sent qualifying students written invitations to participate in the study. Potential participants and their parents were informed of the study's purpose, intent, and conditions of student participation through the invitation letters. Included in the invitation letters were parental consent forms and informed minor assent (Appendix D). Parents who wanted their sons to participate in the study were required to sign and return the informed consent forms so that I could maintain the records of signed parental consent. Participants were also required to sign the informed minor assent if they desired to be in the study. Once the consent forms were collected, I used a lottery process to assign a number for random selection to each student who had met the criteria for participation in the study. The random selection yielded 12 participants. Then I contacted those 12 students and their parents by phone to verify their consent and inform them that the student had been selected to participate in the study. I mailed letters that outlined the times, dates, and locations for interviews as well as an observation schedule. A written "thank you" letter was mailed to the

parents and participants who had volunteered but were not part of those randomly selected for the study.

For this study, I conducted individual, face-to-face, audiotaped interviews at each school setting from April to July 2019. Individual interviews allowed students to recount experiences and give rich details relative to their academic achievement (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). I used a semi-structured, open-ended interview protocol that has been formulated to acquire and understand the distinctive experiences of the participants. Individual interviews were conducted outside the instructional activities of the school day and scheduled when convenient for research participants in a location on the campus where confidentiality was not compromised, as determined by the school administrator.

I secured consent from the participants to audiotape the interviews. Upon each participant's arrival to the designated location, I read the study's overview. Participants turned in the accompanying signed minor assent form as well as the recorded media addendum (Appendix D). The interview was audio taped to capture all reported information and to capture each detail accurately. The interview process was concluded once all the questions had been asked, the responses had been recorded, and the participants had given any final thoughts on the topic. The interviews were designed to be semi-structured to allow me to use probing questions for additional responses and gather more information when responses were not as detailed as needed (Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2009). The interviews lasted between one to two hours; the amount of time spent with each participant varied, contingent upon the length of responses. Participants received an opportunity to reflect upon all interview questions prior to commencing the audio recording. This preparation time was designed to ease any potential anxiety that participants might have been feeling and to prompt more meaningful responses.

The next step in the data collection process was conducting observations. Direct observations took place informally 3 days a week over a 6-month period. Direct observations were observations that take place while an activity or process is happening. These observations were valuable because they account for actual time of event occurrence. Students were observed during the school day, in school settings, including the classroom, gym, and outside. Observation notes were taken on average once a week. Students were located in the classroom, gym, and outdoors daily. They were observed in the classroom during instructional periods. Each day, the school day opened with a *genius hour*, the first hour of the school day when students engaged in enrichment activities such as sign language and Spanish competitions. Students were located in the cafeteria during this time. Observations in this setting lasted for 20 to 30 minutes, a minimum of 2 days a week. Past the 8:00 AM hour, except on special occasions when students reported to classrooms, they were observed while receiving instruction from the classroom teacher or interacting in class activities. Seventy percent of observations took place inside the classroom. Fewer observations took place during physical education. During the observations, I watched for physical setting, interactions, participant actions, exchanges with others, and my own responses to the observations. I realized that some events that occurred during the observations would not be recorded and some activities would not be seen (Creswell, 2013). Per Creswell (2013), observations consist of two types of engagement: participating and observing. In this study, I assumed a nonparticipant observer role. With this approach, I remained as a distant outsider, taking notes without any direct involvement (Creswell, 2013). If there were a need for role change, I could change to a participant observer role, which helped me gain subjective data (Creswell, 2013) but also limited me from recording data.

Thus, the data collection process consisted of securing permission from the school district superintendent to gain access to the students' records, conducting an analysis of the students' records to identify participants who matched the study criteria, securing consent, and conducting interviews and then observations. I concluded the data collection process with a review of the observations to complement the interview data and analysis as well as to clarify any ambiguities in the data.

Researcher Positionality

Positionality refers to "how we are positioned in relation to others, whether dominant or subordinate" (Takacs, 2002). The position that I took in this study was contingent upon the setting chosen for data collection. As a primary investigator for this study and principal of the school, I had an established identity with the participants, defined by my role as a principal in the school district. As a black woman, I am a member of the majority race of students in the research study. Positionality is also defined as "not in terms of fixed identities, but by their vocation within shifting networks of relationships, which can be analyzed and changed" (Takacs, 2002). As the researcher, I gained information through dialogue to make sense of the study participants' lived experiences and bracketed my responses according to my dialogue with the participants. I remained acutely aware of my position concerning each participant.

As a Black female who worked as the principal in a high-poverty school, I had adequate background information to understand the research problem under investigation. Having background knowledge on the research promoted confidence in the overall quality of analysis and findings. Specifically, I could contextually relate to participants' cultural and social underpinnings as it relates to ethnicity and social environment. These commonalities created a bridge between me and the participants. Having background information and connections

allowed me to conceptualize a clear grasp of critical issues and concepts presented in the comprehensive study.

I have served as a teacher for seven years and an administrator for 17 years at the elementary, middle, and high school levels in this district. I have encountered Black males in several capacities, including during my time as a coach. My professional background began as an English teacher in a midsize urban district where I taught at a high school before moving to a small rural district. After years of teaching, I was promoted to the position of assistant principal, principal, and, later, an alternative school director. After my 19th year serving in secondary administrator roles, I was promoted to a principal position in an elementary school. After my promotion to principal, I was later appointed to be a middle school administrator.

With each supervisory role, my beliefs expanded, but I held one core belief that students' capability to learn content is contingent upon if students are provided effective instruction in a supportive environment. Regardless of my placement or assignment, my goal was to provide equitable instruction to all students. As an alternative school director of students where the majority-black males were removed from the traditional school setting because of severe behavior infractions, I learned that these students desired to be supported and to be successful. As a principal, I struggled with understanding why some students, especially Black males, were thriving academically while other Black males were struggling and contemplating dropping out of school. Their lives were comparable from an economic standpoint, and, in many cases, their family structures (single-parent household) were comparable. As a middle school administrator supervising a magnet school program, my interest heightened about factors Black males perceived as influences to their academic success. One of my most significant priorities developed after several years of observation in each school setting. A refined drive arose to

understand the decisions schools make to minimize learning deficiencies and to increase acceleration.

In keeping with phenomenology, I bracketed my experiences (Creswell, 2014). “*Bracketing* is the process used to increase the validity of data collection and analysis by acknowledging prior influences and inherent experiences and beliefs” (Dörfler & Stierand, 2020; Lichtman, 2013). I had both professional and personal relationships and experiences with Black males. However, I had limited understanding of how Black males interpret how they attain their education, except from the perspective of a mother with three sons.

I fundamentally believe that all students can be successful with the right support systems. I also believe that if educators possess knowledge of the Black male’s learning perspective, there will be an increased number of students performing at proficiency and on grade level, along with decreased over-identification in special education. I believe there is a genuine need to provide all employees who teach Black males with a learning perspective from those who experience success.

Patton (2015) described the role of the qualitative researcher as the instrument of the research, meaning the researcher brings her subjectivities into the research. In order to minimize my subjectivities as an African American, I bracketed myself and sought to practice what Patton (2015) referred to as empathic neutrality. I demonstrated empathic neutrality throughout the study by withholding my judgment and by showing respect and responsiveness to the views of my research participants (Dörfler & Stierand, 2020). While I was responsible for all research requirements, including the research design, data collection, and data analysis, I objectively interpreted the experiences of my research participants and drew the conclusions and the implications of the study.

By conducting the study, I hope to understand how Black male students succeed academically in high-poverty settings and to understand which factors influenced their motivation to succeed. Gaining this understanding enables me to contribute professionally and personally to the academic success of Black male students within my range of influence. This understanding also allows me to provide information that can facilitate necessary changes in the academic lives of Black male students outside of my range of influence.

Ensuring Trustworthiness and Rigor

The suitability of the research methods applied for data collection in a study and the transparency of the research processes applied toward the analysis and the interpretation of the study's data determine the reliability of a study's finding (Noble & Smith, 2015). Because of the subjective nature of qualitative research, certain criteria must be met to ensure trustworthiness and rigor. Among these criteria are the concepts of credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability.

Creswell (2009) emphasized the importance of strategies of validation and specific processes when conducting qualitative research. First, I was aware that participants may have altered their responses because I am a school administrator in their school, and they were participants of a research study (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). However, to improve trustworthiness, each participant was asked to confirm the summary of findings and was given the opportunity to provide additional information after the conclusion of the interview. In qualitative research, this process is identified as member checking, a process of confirming the participants' experiences and establishing integrity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2005).

Credibility

Establishing credibility in qualitative research is similar to establishing internal validity

in quantitative research (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Credibility refers to the veracity of the study's findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). I established credibility by observing practices that ensured a researcher's interpretation of the data reflected the intended meaning of participants' responses (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). One such practice is triangulation, which uses multiple sources to ascertain the veracity of the data; for this study, I used interviews, observations, and document analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Another practice for ensuring credibility is member checking (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Because the purpose of this qualitative research was to understand the study's phenomenon from the participants' perspectives, the participants' verification of written accounts increased the study's credibility.

Transferability

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), one of the characteristics of qualitative research is its inability to be generalized, as is done in quantitative research. Because qualitative research is context specific, the findings from this study cannot be generalized (Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, some aspects of the study, such as its findings, can be transferred to contexts that are similar to the present study, that is, Black male students in Grades 6-8 attending rural schools in high-poverty areas. To ensure that the study is transferrable, I provided thick, rich, and detailed descriptions of the study processes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Confirmability

The role of confirmability in a qualitative study is to ensure that the findings of the study corroborate participants' narratives, are free of researcher bias, and are confirmable by other researchers (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To ensure the confirmability of the study, I created an audit trail, by which I documented every step of the research study processes, such as notes on sampling, research materials, analysis techniques, coding, and

emergent themes (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). I saved all notes and materials used in the study and can produce them upon request. I triangulated the data to ensure the dependability of findings.

Dependability

Dependability ensures research findings can be repeated and are consistent (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Having another researcher conduct an inquiry audit of research can validate the dependability of a study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This external approach examines the data collection processes, data analysis, and research study findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Audits are purposed to confirm the findings' accuracy and qualify that the findings are supported by the data collected. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stressed that dependability relies on credibility because of the close ties between the two, and dependability can be achieved through focus groups and individual interviews. To ensure the dependability of this study, I included a thorough description of methods used in research design and implementation, each detail used in data collection, and a reflective appraisal of the processes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Analysis Techniques

I analyzed the collected data with the goal of comprehending the combination of internal and external factors that contributed to the academic success of the study participants. According to Creswell (2009), researchers make sense of data by "peeling back layers of an onion" (Creswell, 2009, p. 183), examining, and reexamining the data to discover new meanings. In other words, the data analysis process may begin as early as during the interview stage of data collection (Creswell, 2014).

For this study, I used neither a transcription software nor a qualitative data analysis software. Instead, I used the five steps for analyzing qualitative data proposed by Roberts (2010).

Step 1 consisted of reading the interview transcript multiple times. Step 2 consisted of organizing and coding the interview questions' responses. Step 3 consisted of identifying themes. Step 4 consisted of reporting the findings. Step 5 consisted of crosschecking the validity of the findings (Roberts, 2010). The subsequent paragraphs describe how I applied these steps in the data analysis.

To fulfil Step 1, I invested a significant amount of time in transcribing the interview recordings from each participant. I listened to each interview recording several times to ensure that I produced a verbatim transcription of each participant's recording (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). Once I had completed transcribing the recordings, I removed any identifiable information and ascribed a pseudonym to each participant's transcription; the pseudonym was to protect the identity of each participant. Then, I printed two copies of each transcription, and I kept one copy of the transcription unblemished while I worked on the other transcription copy. After this preparatory process, I was able to implement Step 1, which involved repeated reading of the transcriptions. This step enabled me to get a sense of all the data I had collected.

To fulfil Step 2, I conducted open coding, during which I hand-coded each of the printed transcriptions to determine the major themes that emerged from the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Merriam (2009) describes coding as precipitating the process by which a qualitative study begins to make sense. Coding involves gathering text data (i.e., sentences and images) into categories (Creswell, 2014). I wrote down the codes that emerged from each transcription in the margins of the documents. Then, I read over the transcriptions several times to ensure that the codes accurately captured each of the participant's narratives. After that, I assigned descriptive codes to distinct concepts for each interview question.

In Step 3, I transitioned to axial coding, during which I applied inductive and deductive reasoning to break down the transcriptions into categories of commonly relatable codes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). First, I grouped and compiled the codes that I had identified from the open coding into tables. Then, I identified commonly relatable codes by noting the frequency with which they occurred in the participant interview transcriptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Once repeated codes and themes became apparent, a coding was assigned, and a codebook was created. Then, I looked for themes aligned to the research questions and the research phenomenon by connecting the categories of codes I had compiled (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I shared the findings from the interview data analysis with study participants for member checking, which allowed them to confirm the accuracy of my analysis of their responses, as well as point out and explain any misinterpretations that I might have made from their responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The participants were satisfied with my interpretation of the responses. By member checking the findings, I was able to confirm the trustworthiness of the study as well as establish its integrity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2005).

Having identified the themes from the interview transcription data, I moved to analyzing observation data. The same analysis method was applied that was used for coding the interview transcription data to the observations data. After coding and summarizing the observation data, I compared the themes from the observation data to those of the interview data to note any point of convergence and divergence between the two; I then compared the findings from the two data sources to the literature as a means of triangulating the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

To fulfil Steps 4 and 5, I needed to determine how to present the findings. I decided to use a qualitative report that contained a summary of the findings, the themes, and their

supporting descriptions. I presented the findings in a descriptive format with thick descriptions that provided a clear picture of the researched phenomena, thus, adding to the study's validity (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Also, I created tables and figures that showcased the thematic findings that emerged from the data, which I present in Chapter 4 for the reader. Finally, I kept an audit trail of all the processes that were undertaken during the data analysis process to show exactly how I arrived at the study findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Chapter Summary

Chapter 3 contains the specific procedures and methods that guided this qualitative interpretive phenomenological study toward its purpose of exploring the lived experiences of select Black male students who have been academically successful in a high-poverty rural middle school in the Southern United States. Using Bandura's (1986) SCT as the theoretical framework, I sought to answer research questions that consider how behavior, personal factors, and environmental influences interact to affect the self-efficacy of these Black male middle school students in the school setting. Specifically, Chapter 3 provided an in-depth discussion of the study's methodology and research design, which is that of a qualitative interpretive phenomenological study. Interpretive phenomenology highlights the significance of participants' experiences and relationships, the meanings they associate with those relationships, and their perceptions of the world, both the seen and the unseen. Selecting interpretive phenomenology as the study's research design allowed me to understand and analyze the educational environmental factors, behaviors, and personal factors that these students identify as responsible for their academic successes. Next, the chapter explored the site, the participants—12 Black male students from a rural middle school in the Southern United States—and how purposeful sampling was used for participant selection. Chapter 3 also contained information about the

ethical issues and permissions that bounded the study and how I addressed them. The chapter also presented a discussion of the data sources used—documents, interviews, and observations—and a description of the instrumentation that enabled me to gather data from these sources. Also, the chapter provided a breakdown of the data collection process and a discussion of my positionality with the research phenomenon. Ultimately, the chapter provided a discussion of issues related to trustworthiness and rigor in the study and the ways I addressed them. Finally, the chapter concluded with a description of the data analysis process, providing a breakdown of the steps I took to analyze the data and arrive at the study's findings.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Findings

The purpose of this qualitative interpretive phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of select Black male students who have been academically successful in a high-poverty rural middle school in the Southern United States. In the previous chapters, factors believed to affect Black male students have been identified. Family, peers, mentors, teachers, educational environment, community support, and general factors have been shown to have a critical impact on the achievement of Black male students (Day & Dotterer, 2018; Warren et al., 2018).

The study sought to answer the following topic-based central research question: What are the lived experiences of academically successful Black male students in a high-poverty rural middle school in the Southern United States? In addition, the study sought to answer the following secondary sub-questions, which were based on Bandura's SCT:

RQ1: What factors in the educational environment do Black male students in a high-poverty rural middle school identify as supportive to academic achievement?

RQ2: What behaviors do Black male students in a high-poverty rural middle school perceive as supportive to their academic achievement?

RQ3: What personal factors do Black male students in a high-poverty rural middle school perceive as supportive to their academic achievement?

Using a semi-structured interview protocol, I interviewed 12 academically successful Black male students; I triangulated the interview data with the students' school records and state accountability assessment. Additionally, I conducted classroom observations over the course of a six-month period. I observed students in all their classes; however, more observation time was spent in math and language arts classrooms. I applied content and thematic analysis approaches

to the data collected in order to identify the factors that the study participants considered as supportive to their pursuit of academic achievement. Presented in this chapter are a description of the study participants, followed by a presentation of the study findings, an analysis of the findings, and a summary of the major areas covered within the chapter. I present the findings according to the study's research questions and provide a discussion of the themes that emerged from each question. I also analyze the importance of each emerged theme individually, as related to each research question and extant literature.

Description of Participants

The study participants were 12 academically successful Black males between ages 11–13 who attended Success Heights School, a rural middle school in the Southern United States. At the time of the study, one of the students was in the sixth grade, six students were in the seventh grade, three students were in the eighth grade, and two students were in ninth. The 12 students were enrolled in a middle school program, taking advanced placement classes in language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. All participants met the criteria for participation in this study. The selection criteria included (a) GPA of 3.0 or higher, (b) state-reported assessment data with scores in the top two categories of scoring, and (c) enrollment in a rural school in the Southern United States. The selected participants had also achieved 80% or above in all core subjects (math, science, social studies, language arts). In addition, all the chosen students self-identified as Black males and were eligible for free lunch. Participants' identity as Black males and the academic achievement level warranted their inclusion in the study.

After the school district's superintendent granted permission to conduct research, I was given access to students' records. Success Heights School, a middle school in a rural setting, was chosen as the site for the study. The 12 students participated in the study only after contact had

been established with and consent granted by their parents; I also ensured that participants signed the assent form prior to data collection.

The 12 participants lived in four different geographic divisions within the school district. Four students lived with their biological parents and siblings, and one student lived with his mother, siblings, and stepfather. Five students lived with their biological mother and siblings, one student lived with grandparents with no siblings in the home, and one student lived with his father, grandmother, and siblings. To protect the identities of the research participants, I assigned the participants the following pseudonyms: Astute, Brainy, Canny, Driven, Epitome, Fabian, Genius, Haaken, Ingenious, Judge, Keen, and Learner. Table 1 displays participants' pseudonym, age, and grade level.

Table 1

Participants Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Grade
Astute	12	6
Brainy	13	7
Canny	12	7
Driven	13	7
Epitome	13	7
Fabian	12	7
Genius	12	7
Haaken	14	7
Ingenious	14	8
Judge	13	8
Keen	15	9
Learner	15	9

Note. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of participants.

Participant 1

I assigned this participant the pseudonym Astute. The participant was a sixth-grade student with two siblings. He received As and Bs in his honors classes during seventh grade.

Participant 2

I assigned this participant the pseudonym Brainy. The participant was a seventh-grade student with a sister in the military. He received As and Bs in his advanced classes. He also made some Cs but improved them to As and Bs.

Participant 3

I assigned this participant the pseudonym Canny. The participant was a seventh-grade student with three siblings. He received As and Bs in his advanced classes during seventh grade.

Participant 4

I assigned this participant the pseudonym Driven. The participant was a seventh-grade student with one sibling. He received As in his advanced classes.

Participant 5

I assigned this participant the pseudonym Epitome. The participant was a seventh-grade student with two younger siblings. He received As and Bs in his honors classes.

Participant 6

I assigned this participant the pseudonym Fabian. The participant was a seventh-grade student who had attended schools in this district since he started elementary school. He was a twin, but he and his twin brother attended different schools. He had 5 other siblings. He received As in advanced classes.

Participant 7

I assigned this participant the pseudonym Genius. The participant was a seventh-grade student with two siblings. He had received As since entering kindergarten.

Participant 8

I assigned this participant the pseudonym Haaken. The participant was a seventh-grade student with one sibling. He received As and Bs in his advanced classes.

Participant 9

I assigned this participant the pseudonym Ingenious. The participant was an eighth-grade student with two siblings. He received As and Bs in his advanced classes.

Participant 10

I assigned this participant the pseudonym Judge. The participant was an eighth-grade student with one sibling. He received As, Bs, and Cs in his advanced classes.

Participant 11

I assigned this participant the pseudonym Keen. The participant was a ninth-grade student with 3 siblings. He received As and Bs in his advanced and honors classes.

Participant 12

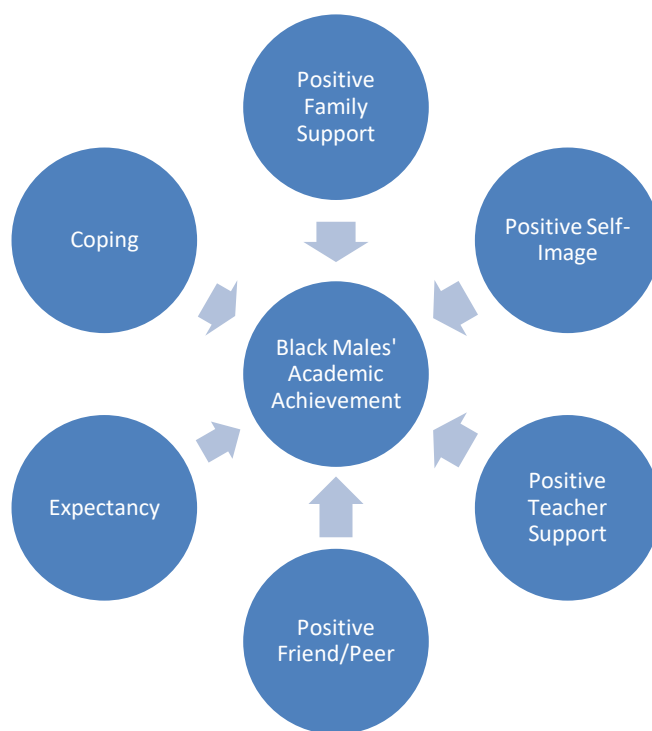
I assigned this participant the pseudonym Learner. The participant was a ninth-grade student with two siblings. He received As and Bs in his advanced and honors classes.

Presentation of Findings

According to the degree of prominence through data collection methods, six themes emerged from the interviews and classroom observations. Themes were chosen based upon the number of times the subject was mentioned across the 12 interviews. Positive friend/peer network, positive family support, positive teacher support, positive self-image, expectancy, and coping are themes that emerged from the study that participants perceived as influential in the educational environment and supportive of their academic achievement as shown in Figure 1. In the next section, the findings from each research question are discussed.

Figure 1

Themes that Emerged from the Study



RQ1: What factors in the educational environment do Black male students in a high-poverty rural middle school identify as supportive to academic achievement?

Research Question 1 examined environmental factors that can possibly affect behavior. The environment was comprised of social factors including family, friends, and observational learning. Research Question 1 informed the creation of questions about the environmental factors that affected their behavior. These questions explored the kinds of support from peers, parents, siblings and family members, community members, and community institutions that participants received toward their education and academic work. Themes of positive friend/peer network, positive family support, and positive teacher support emerged.

Positive Friend/Peer Network. One of the themes that emerged from the analysis of Research Question 1 was that of a positive friend network. Study participants perceived their

friends as positive contributors to their education generally and academic work specifically. Positive perceptions surrounded friends' verbal and physical supports within the classroom and outside of school. Participants shared numerous examples of when friends showed support in spoken form. Participants also received other forms of support that were nonverbal.

The data revealed that some of the participants understood the extent to which their friends offered support. Ingenious expressed his perception of support received from his best friend:

My best friend, she tells me to study when I don't be wanting to study. She makes me study. Yeh like, if we have homework, she'll make me, well not make me, she'll tell me and bribe me to do my homework. She be like I'm already done with my homework, stuff like that, and she try to make me feel I should do my homework. So, I try to do it.

Ingenious's best friend used a tone of persuasion to encourage him to do his work. Studying did not appear to be a priority to him until he was influenced by his friend, whose opinion he obviously valued. The value that Ingenious placed on his relationship with his best friend compelled him to change his usual behavior to accommodate her. At the time of the study, this relationship was a positive partnership.

When asked about the support of other friends, males specifically, Ingenious responded that his friends do not really talk about education. However, he indicated that both male and female friends and classmates "facetime" each other and talk about schoolwork and assignments. He clearly identified the female friend's support as educational support, but he did not consider time on the phone for "facetime" as academic or educational support.

Haaken, who was in the same homeroom with Ingenious, shared a similar narrative about after-school connections made with friends as those connections relate to educational support.

When asked the interview question, "What support do you receive from your friends toward your education generally and academic work specifically?" he responded as follows:

I receive help, like when I don't know how to do a subject we just got started learning, sometimes classmates, we'll get in a group chat and face time and talk about it. It comes with an iPhone, so, if you don't have an iPhone, you can't participate. At school, they will talk to me, like, if I don't know how to do it. But that's like mostly girls because the boys don't talk. But it is some boys on facetime.

Haaken presented an unenthusiastic perception of males and their seriousness about completing school assignments. There is an element of disengagement from the conversation, as the girls dominated the conversation. It is certain that the males were interested in being a part of the "facetime" chat, and they likely benefitted; however, it was difficult to determine the true level of disengagement from the discussion. It is possible that the males were mimicking each other's behavior and refraining from the discussion about schoolwork.

From a positive aspect, students worked collaboratively, using technology to supplement their learning experiences. These bonding opportunities created avenues to hear diversified opinions of others, which may expand their cognitive abilities (DeLay et al., 2016; Poldin et al., 2015). The example above shows that participants valued having the resource of friends and the input they offered to their discussions. This bonding was predicated on the idea that group chats took place regularly.

Judge identified a similar perspective as Ingenious. Both young men found verbal support as supportive of their education generally and academic work specifically. Both were appreciative of the help their friends offered, even though it was in words only. Judge gave an example of when his friends were supportive in the classroom. He explained,

Today, we took a writing exam and when I got frustrated with the exams, they told me to calm down and think what comes to my head and stop thinking so hard. So, they pushed me to do better.

When I asked for other examples, Judge slightly diverted the conversation to discuss the encouragement he received in relation to sports, which implied his friends were male, as the girls were not involved in the same sports. Judge noted:

You have to have good grades to play [sports]. My friends told me I will make the team. It pushes me to make the team. They push me and tell me I can do it and tell me not to give up.

Judge was motivated by the words of his friends; he found confidence in them enough to alter his emotions to align with the suggestions his friends offered him. During classroom observation in his math class, Judge listened to the advice of friends for the purpose of writing and thinking as he did in this example. The support group was critically important to helping him feel emotionally supported enough to meet his writing goal.

Brainy disclosed a related perspective regarding his friends' support of his academics and education. His friends did more than encourage him verbally; they took the initiative to demonstrate academic concepts for him.

Like today, Mr. L. came in there teaching math. I don't understand some (math) things, so they [friends] came over and wrote on my desk to show me how to do the problem. Like if I have my hand up for a long time, they can tell if I'm struggling. If I just sit there, they'll ask, "Do you need help with something?"

Brainy's friends were observant of his behaviors and detected his struggle without his prompting. He benefited from their willingness to help him resolve his lack of math understanding. In the

example, Brainy did not seek support from friends, but his friends seemed concerned enough to help him achieve his goal. He may have learned the essence of teamwork. The essence of friendship was prevalent in the math classroom as students sat in groups of 3-4 and assisted each other on Algebra concepts. Clearly, more students preferred the assistance of peers than that of the classroom teacher. They consulted with the teacher if the entire group was unsuccessful in answering certain questions.

Canny's friends offered him support beyond the school day. Canny indicated that he was supported outside of the school day by friends. Canny noted, "Mostly, they push me like when we have homework or something and it's hard, they push me to do it, and when I forget my work, they send me pictures of the work [homework]." Canny's friends overlooked his forgetfulness. He did not indicate that they made any negative comments about having to provide him with the same documents that were provided to all of them. Friends, in this case, displayed an accommodating behavior that suggested they took on responsibilities that were not their own. Canny was shown the value of being studious as his friends made provisions when they were prepared, and he was not. Sharing is part of friendship. If this behavior is a continuous behavior, his friends were endorsing his behavior, which fails to lead to acceptance of responsibility. His awareness of his friends' preparation encouraged him to be more responsible.

The oldest two of the study participants touched on the importance of friends for redirection and collaboration. Issues of procrastination and staying motivated to complete tasks were induced from their responses to questions regarding support from friends. Keen stated, "They tell me to work hard every day, and when they see me slacking or slipping in my grades. They come talk to me and expect me to do better. Sometimes, they help me understand problems."

Learner presented a similar sentiment when he talked about his online class: “They tell me to get better, complete work when it's supposed to be completed, do work on time, listen to teachers, not procrastinate.” Learner acknowledged how far behind he and two other students were with their assignments. In the end, he said the students decided to work together and support one another so they could all complete the class before the end of school. He said, “We did it,” with a slight smile and elevated tone.

Classroom observation revealed that Keen and Learner benefitted from the class partnership, and they understood that two heads are better than one. These two friends changed their outlook on the situation they faced by inspiring one another. In their online course that had only five enrollees, students sat with one another in the library at computers against the wall. Students talked through the assignments, encouraging one another and offering support. Some of their communication was jousting: “Man, you know that ain't right!” “I can show you how to answer the question.” Loud laughter was heard from one of them while the other shook his head and smiled. Because Keen and Learner completed the assignment and accomplished the task at hand, they continued to strengthen their bond. In this case, these students were model students that Keen and Learner could emulate.

Friend support is positively perceived by Black male participants in the middle school environment. These Black males perceived their friends as constructive, encouraging, supportive, and engaging. Only one of the 11 participants stated his friends did not offer him academic support on any level.

Positive Family Support. According to existing research, parent support plays an integral part in the success of students in the school environment (Day & Dotterer, 2018). Mothers especially seemed to be the core of many students' foundations. Parents supplanted

ideas of resiliency, tenacity, strong work ethic, and futuristic goals in their children (Day & Dotterer, 2018).

The conversation between the participants and their parents ranged from a coaching style to a more aggressive stance. Many parents adamantly conveyed to their children that education is the path to a life of promise. Canny noted:

Well, my parents tell me to do my work because the only way I will get what I want and achieve what I want in life is through education...and they do their part by paying for field trips and for school shirts and clubs. My part is to do my work, so I can get what I want in life.

Canny's parents had confidence in what a good education could provide; therefore, they suggested one avenue to success--education. Canny understood that his parents would fulfill the role of financial support, and he had the responsibility of maintaining a work ethic that would lead to a prosperous life. The family had provided the necessary tools the student needed to be successful. As a result, the stressors and distractions associated with the extras (field trips) were removed, and he could freely concentrate on his academics. Not only were Canny's basic needs met, but he was also afforded additional school opportunities that may inspire a higher level of school engagement.

Brainy shared how his mother, with whom he does not reside, and his grandparents interact with him. Brainy explained:

I don't live with my mom, but she is in contact with my teacher, Ms. S. She's my sister's old volleyball coach, so she calls her to see what I'm doing. She tells me "you can't be messing up because when you move here with me, you are not going to be able to play basketball...we're gonna have an hour of study time even when you don't have

homework." Plus, she says, "I was going to get you some new shoes" cuz she knows I really like school shoes and stuff. My grandma takes my PlayStation and stuff and right now, I don't have my phone.

Brainy's mother attempted to help her son develop study habits. She used a bargaining strategy by making references to things he desired--athletics and material possessions. The mother's assumption was Brainy ranks sports and shoes in high priority; as such, she presented the idea of their removal until certain academic standards were met. Brainy was extrinsically motivated, a behavior which his grandmother realized as well. However, unlike the mother, the grandmother removed possessions when Brainy failed to fulfill his responsibilities without negotiating with him. Their approaches were different, but their desires were the same for him.

When asked what type of support he received, Brainy stated, "My grandma and my mom support me. If it's something that's like not too much, my Grandma will pay it. If it's like less than \$200, my Grandma will pay for it. Momma pays for the more expensive things." Brainy had a grandfather in the home, but he did not mention his grandfather while responding to the interview question. Because there was no acknowledgement of a grandfather, a follow up question was asked: "You didn't mention your granddad in the first couple of questions. Is his role as defined or prevalent or as strong in your life as Grandma? Tell me about that."

If he says something to me, then I know the deal. Most of the time he says you better get on those books and stuff and start studying or I'm going to get in trouble. He just doesn't say much to me; he knows I will get my grades up. My grandma just keeps reminding me I have to get my grades up.

Further prompting revealed that Brainy's grandfather was occasionally actively involved in his education and as the need arose. Brainy described one such occasion:

If he sees me getting off too bad, like when my grandmother starts getting really aggravated, he'll come in and get more serious and tell me for real you need to stop playing. My grandma told me I need to start staying in for PE. I had to stay in for like a week.

Brainy saw his grandfather as a silent but authoritative role model who did not have to repeat himself. Brainy understood there was less tolerance from this masculine figure. Granddad's role was one of a quiet observer. He appeared to examine the situation of the child and offer simple direct commands. Granddad's presence was a strong indication of his level of control. Brainy seemed to respond to Granddad without additional discussions as Granddad was not providing the number of chances that the female family members were giving.

Genius's mother offered a good example of high parent involvement. With daily observations and support from parents, students are less likely to fall behind in school (Erol & Turhan, 2018). Genius's mother was willing to study with him and offer support until he gained understanding of the content. He was fortunate to have tools for educational enrichment and intervention in his home. His mother was also watchful of his grades and took actions immediately when grades were at a B level. The implications were that she did not accept good grades but expected excellent grades. This mother's expectations were lofty for her child. Genius spoke about the daily exchanges he had with his mother. He explained:

My mama, she helps me study when I need it. She makes me study, and things I don't understand, she makes me understand it. She will study with me. She pays fees and for field trips. She attends meetings and school programs. She says things like good afternoon...do you have any homework? Did you do good on your test? Once, I got to B

in somebody's class. She helped me by going to see the teacher to see what I could do to make that B come up.

Keen had a unique situation, being raised by his father and paternal grandmother.

However, he spoke of his mother as if she were present in the home. Per Keen:

He [Dad] supports me by checking on me every day. When my dad gets off work every day, he asks if I have any homework. He also likes to keep in mind what my grades are, keep update, constantly asking what grade do you have in each class, and if I'm not doing so well, he will not only speak to the teacher, but speak to my friends and ask them about the problems and see if they have similar problems. The support I receive from my mom is she's really outgoing and if I have a problem with a grade, she will go out the way to find out why I'm not passing or not doing good. She saw information from the teacher and when she found out and I got home, I got a punishment for it.

Keen's parents offered another example of high parent engagement and involvement. Keen stated he was questioned daily about homework practices and current grades. With the consistent checking of grades, these parents were minimizing the chances of experiencing any surprises about grades. The father also went the extra mile by seeking information from friends to determine if Keen was the only student struggling in the class. The father likely used this information to gauge his son's authentic level of engagement and honesty because if his friends were not having a similar experience, he would draw logical conclusions that explained the hidden details that the parents were not able to observe directly. Piecing together the details allowed the father to identify the root of the problem. His father employed investigative practices because he realized he could not take all of Keen's reports at face value.

Fabian spoke about both of his parents and how they were involved with his schooling. In addition, he talked about the consequences he received for his actions. Fabian explained:

They motivate me every day to be on top. They always told me to keep up the good work and other positive things to keep me on task. Keep up the good work; begin with the end in mind. Sometimes they will go out and celebrate the achievements that I've done. Both. Yes. I get help with homework...not homework, homework—just get stuff printed out. Since I came here [school], she has not had to help me with work. Because I've been focused.

Fabian appeared to require fewer directives and corrections from his parents. However, he realized his parents were his support base, and they were available if he needed them. From the dialogue, Fabian suggested that his parents were encouraging and planted mental notes to keep him focused. His mother was enterprising in that she conducted research to find additional resources that may support his learning. Finally, the celebrations, extrinsic rewards, may be one motivation that kept him focused.

Driven lived with a custodial parent: his mother. His father resided in another city. He spoke about their involvement in his academic life. Driven elaborated:

When we get report cards, I receive money, shoes, and stuff like that. If I get all A's, Dad sometimes acknowledges it. He doesn't really know my academic work. I will have to take a picture and send it to him. When I send a picture, he'll say great job and if I have a low-grade like a B, he'll say I need to do better. From my Mom, like if I get all As, I get shoes.

Parent involvement existed with Driven, but one of his parents was less engaged. The student continued to maintain high grades, and this achievement may have been due to the balanced

encouragement and acknowledgements from the mother. There seemed to be a solid commitment from his mother. Driven likely felt a greater sense of reliance on his mother for overall support. During the interview, when he made the comment about his father's unawareness of his grades, his voice lowered, and his tone changed as he explained his father's absence. There was a sound of disappointment in his voice. This young man desired more involvement from his father.

Epitome lived in a single parent home. His father was incarcerated. He was the oldest of two other siblings. Epitome explained:

I get gifts and balloons, money, and card...Whenever we graduate or get a report card...I have a school sponsor for my fees. Mom pays some fees. She does not help with homework. She tells me to do better like when I have Bs.

According to Epitome, Epitome's mother was not as highly involved as other study participants' parents. His experience with parenting was slightly different than others. This mother supported his education on a minimal level, including the paying of school fees. At the same time, Epitome acknowledged that he received recognition approximately four times a year. This student understood that his mother had academic expectations for him, and he performed to maintain the expectation. In this example, the mother was instilling independence, self-motivation, and periodic rewards.

Haaken lived with both his mother and father. His father was a truck driver and was away from home several days. Per Haaken:

When I bring home my progress report, say I have a bad grade on it, they talk to me about it and say I need to do better. They'll help me. The next day they ask me to bring home my book so we can look over it. Stuff like that, tell them the skill and my mom will print some papers off about it. Like worksheets. She helps me with the work. And my

dad, he tells me, like he motivates me, like if you don't do good in school, you ain't going to never get to go to college and play sports like you want to. He makes sure I do my schoolwork.

One important aspect from this passage was evidence of family support. Haaken's parents desired that he was successful in school; as they inspected the progress reports, they expected to see academic excellence. These parents used a combination of support approaches that complemented each other. They directly addressed grades that were below target. In addition, they tackled the learning process as a unit. The mother's efforts to seek additional resources demonstrated she was supportive and willing to make additional efforts on his behalf. She made it clear that there were resources available to supplement the lessons taught. The father, on the other hand, like Brainy's mother, used sports as a motivator to improve grades. Concurrently, the father brought to the forefront what was important to the child as a negotiation piece, dangling his future prospect of sports as a reminder. Both parents taught Haaken valuable lessons on resiliency, determination, and focus.

Ingenious also lived in a single parent household. He was the youngest of four male siblings. According to Ingenious:

My parents don't let me play sports if I don't have good academic scores. I get punishment for making bad grades. They push me to do good to like go to college. They talk to me every day about how proud they are of me, to see me succeed in life. They do this daily. She pays for all my schoolbooks that I need to buy. I don't really need help with homework. I call my friends for help.

Ingenious's mother had high expectations and good parental involvement. Ingenious understood how his parents expected him to operate: good grades preceded participation in

sports. His mother established priorities with academics being a top priority, so Ingenious understood that he must perform at an acceptable level before he could participate in sports. In addition, Ingenious received ongoing verbal support that acknowledged his dedication to academic achievement. Ingenious's mother was a clear example of a supportive but a firm mother. This mother was helping her son develop a clear sense of priorities, an understanding which is a core skill needed to be successful in life.

In summary, each of the parents understood the importance of education. Attaining education was continually expressed as a core value in each passage. In spite of the levels of engagement and involvement, parents and guardians valued their children making good grades. The support students received from parents provided valuable insights about achievement for middle school Black males.

Positive Teacher Support. An overarching theme of teacher support evolved as participants told their story about the school environment. Teachers served an integral role in building student confidence, tenacity, and resiliency to tackle challenging grade level texts. Some participants believed that there were racial undertones inherent in the way their teachers support them.

Canny voiced diverse messages about his identity and treatment from others. Canny noted:

Sometimes I think there's an issue with my skin color. When I think about it sometimes in class, if I'm done with my work and other people of a different race gets finished with their work and they are on a game and I want to get on a game, I say something about it, I get in trouble, but they don't get in trouble. But most of time we're treated fairly. (Are there any other examples?) My science teacher is a Black teacher and it's like she expects

more from us and our coach too. He [coach] tells us we already got one strike when you were born. He says if you do right in the world, you have a better life. Mr. F [the custodian] always asks us to help him and when we help him, he says you guys are the leaders of tomorrow and that is something I think about. We're the only one he calls on to help him.

As Canny described the scenario with his teacher about the application of unequal practices, he was quite disturbed. Canny's assumption was that students of all races should be able to utilize their time the same way in the classroom. When asked for elaboration, Canny failed to identify whether he had lost his privilege to play games because of some prior incident. However, he provided an example of when he felt because he was a Black male the Black male employees viewed him and interacted with him differently. One of the Black male teachers spoke directly to him about the stigma of being African American and how it could possibly affect his future. It is probable that the Black male teacher's comment was predicated on his personal experiences, and as a result, he desired to share his experiences with younger Black males. The nature of the comment does not clearly imply a negative tone; however, for a child who experienced exasperated situations in the classroom with a White teacher, he respected the Black teacher more. As a result, Canny may have assumed that what had transpired was caused by his being African American. Also, the janitor sent subtle messages about race to the students by highlighting that black students were chosen for a particular task. This subliminal message might encourage the student to feel a sense of pride because he was African American.

During a classroom observation with a White female teacher, Canny, a 6-foot, 300-pound male, was observed sitting in the rear of the classroom. He was distracted and responded to the teacher only when called upon. He hovered over his desk with a frown on his forehead, a look of

discontentment. He responded with correct responses but appeared to be disturbed that he was required to respond.

Brainy's experience was different from that of Canny's. Brainy had not experienced any issues with being a Black male in school. He spoke about a prior White teacher specifically:

So far, I haven't had any problem with anybody treating me any differently. My third-grade teacher, she was like real, if I had a problem with anything, she would like help me out. And I had A's like every time with that teacher. And my grandma said, you got A's and B's with that teacher helping you, and when you get older, some teachers are not going to do that, so you need to not take too much of an advantage of a teacher because she's really helping you. She was a nice teacher. I had to respect her and stuff.

He was asked if he had come to understand if being a Black male really did not matter in school.

Brainy responded:

Teachers signed up to do this job. They got to enjoy this job. It really shouldn't matter to them what kind of students they have. It could be the color of their skin or how short they are. It shouldn't matter. It doesn't. I have not encountered anything differently because I'm Black.

The undertone of Brainy's passage was strictly positive. He noted that a prior teacher offered him extreme support. His grandmother cautioned him to appreciate and respect the teacher because her efforts might be interpreted as her awareness that the teacher's support for Brainy was an exception rather than the norm. To Brainy, racial concerns did not exist. To a large degree, he was fortunate that he had not encountered any issue that suggested he would be treated differently because of his race.

My observation of Brainy in his language arts classroom painted a vivid picture of his hyperactive behavior. His jovial nature was present on the day of observation as it was every day. He laughed while no one else was laughing and had to be redirected by his teacher on two occasions. Brainy replied, "What did I do?" and after a reprimand and reminder about next steps of contacting parents, he replied, "Yes ma'am."

Genius's account was somewhat parallel to Canny's. They both experienced an issue with the use of technology. Genius noted:

They think all the lil' Black kids all bad and stuff, and they think we be the only ones on YouTube. And it's a kid right beside me on YouTube and he never gets in trouble. Two of 4 teachers think Black kids are bad and only say something to the Black kids. They be back there talking like the Caucasian kids and she'll say something to me and put me out the room and stuff. Our principal treats us the way she wants to be treated. Like, she interacts the same with us because she's Black.

Genius was disturbed by the treatment he received in class from his White teachers. While expounding on this passage, Genius's tone was of irritation, and he frowned while speaking. Genius believed there were clear lines of division between how Black and White students were treated, and he believed ethnicity caused the distinction. I wonder if Genius was treated differently because he was an African American.

Another study participant, Keen, had a strong background in Black history as he responded to the interview questions from the basis of slavery. After redirection, he explained his experiences with being a Black male:

They expect more out of Black males because you look at our ancestors in the past and it motivates us to work harder and go the extra mile in order to succeed. They worked so

hard for our freedom and so long people died for us. So, I think they expect more out of us. I feel like I'm treated the same, but also they expect us to do the extra things. Across-the-board, all of them. For example, if there is a Black history project, I think they expect more because we're Black than the White man. Every month we should celebrate Blacks. No ma'am, it's the same. I am not treated differently than Black girls. It's easier for them. The world makes it easier for them than for us. So, I think teachers are harder on us Black boys because the real world is going to be harder than it is for the man, White man or White girl... When I ask a question in class, and another girl asks the same question. The teacher will reference the girl first and in an easy fashion... very calm with it, and when I asked the same question oh, it was more of an attitude. I don't want to say attitude. It was just a harder, manlier voice. I guess he wanted to get in my head, make sure I understand it and don't forget it. Yes ma'am, there is a different tone used with Black males. Yes, Coach. I will say it's because of who they look up to and who their role models are. I think it all starts with home training and everybody not blessed to have two parents, good mother and father, so that's why I say they are harder on us. Because there's a Black male, he kind of make sure we grow up to be good men and fathers, and we succeed because most kids don't have a dad at home or a mother.

Keen expressed several ideas, but at the end of his response, he resolved why he believed that Black males are treated differently. Initially, Keen reflected on the sacrifices of his ancestors as far back as slavery. He believed the oppressed past set the tone for how African Americans are treated today by Caucasians and other African Americans. He expressed how expectations from both Black and White teachers remained high of Black students; however, he implied the expectations existed for the same reasons. He believed expectations were higher because of

African Americans' exploited past, which should prompt today's African Americans to operate from an appreciation mindset, and thereby, they should exhibit intense work ethic. This mindset means being especially assiduous in the attempt to achieve. Keen observed differences within the race between Black boys and Black girls. He implied the girls received gentle promptings versus Black males who experienced a less sensitive tone. Then he made the comment sound more favorable and suggested young Black males were not only more responsive to a harsher tone but also remembered the information presented to them when it was given in a stricter voice. Keen thought deeply about why African Americans should be treated differently. He believed Black children who do not have a strong family foundation and support were less likely to be successful. He concluded that being treated differently in this sense was a necessity for the Black male to have a successful life.

Fabian responded to the interview question and shared his perspective based upon his school experiences. He explained:

Different teachers may think just because you're a Black male that you might not be as smart as some of the other White kids just because they think some of us are ghetto and stuff. Some of us can outperform most of the other kids, even though we are Black males. I observed this at my old school and I proved my point that I am a Black male, that I can succeed in any way. Yes, I do. Most of the time I have higher grades than the White kids. I can do as much as they can.

Research has shown that African Americans fall below Caucasians in the areas of reading and math (Atwell et al., 2019; Carter & Welner, 2013; Pitre, 2014). Fabian believed the opposite was true for some Black students. In this passage, he compared his academic performance to White students and ranked himself highly. Because of his successful, past academic performance and

having surpassed others academically, he exclaimed boldly about the competence of Black males. Fabian spoke from the perspective of what he considered to be teachers' beliefs about Black students, but he also stated that he did not experience a different treatment than White students. Fabian was observant of his surroundings, enough to establish that differences in treatment existed. Fabian displayed high confidence and efficacy. His confidence and efficacy was noticeable in every classroom. As he sat on row three in his science classroom, he remained attentive to his Chromebook as some of the other students around him engaged in chatter and laughs. The tasks the students performed were quite challenging, and when he got to a place where he did not understand, he raised his hand for the teacher's explanation. He listened intently to her patient, almost monotone voice and gazed at the screen while she explained. When her explanations were completed, he nodded and told her he understood. Then he resumed working on his Chromebook without interacting with any of the other students.

One of the study participants, Judge, said the following about teacher support:

They treat us the same as they treat the Caucasians. They treat us equally. Yes ma'am. Because my principal does not allow racism and bullying, and she makes sure that everybody is treated equally.

Judge believed racism in school was prevented by the school leader. His confidence in the principal to establish boundaries on discrimination was an erroneous assumption, but it suggested he believed the principal exhibited overt authority and control over the school environment and school culture. He likely believed his school was a safe learning environment if such large issues could be controlled by one authoritative figure.

Learner, another participant, shared his perception of teacher support:

I get supported, like, a different way than everybody else. Everybody treats me differently than everybody else...Like I stand out the most. It's like out of all the students here, unlike the student who gets the most encouragement because they know my potential. All the teachers know my potential, so they want me to do better. It doesn't necessarily matter in school. I don't get treated any better than anyone else.

Learner's expressions were ideal words one would want all students to express. He described his relationship with his teachers as one of positive support. He perceived his teachers as positively influential on his achievement. Being influenced by teachers who have higher expectations challenged Learner to advance. Equally represented in this passage is the idea of elevation above others. He and Fabian shared this commonality. Learner not only considered himself as a standout, but he also adamantly believed his teachers viewed him the same. Learner did not address his academic performance. He did not suggest that he had the highest GPA, and according to his academic records, he was not the highest performing student. He was the only study participant who discussed the teachers in this manner.

Epitome presented a similar scenario as Canny and Genius. He experienced some differences in treatment from teachers:

They treat everybody the same, but I feel like they treat some Blacks different. Some Blacks are treated differently. Like sometimes I ask to go the restroom and can't go, but the Whites can. It is like that in one class.

Overall, Epitome believed all of his teachers offered equitable treatment to him with the exception of one. When asked how often the example above occurred, he stated it happened regularly. Outside of this example, he could not provide any other examples when treatment was different among students, so his perceptions were generally positive.

Haaken voiced painfully negative perceptions of his teachers with respect to comparable treatment to other students:

Like, I'm like big and stuff; they like think I'm rough, like I'mma try to hurt somebody, but it ain't even like that. Black and big. Cuz, I could like be walking up the hallway and like the teachers and stuff tell their kids stay away from him cuz he like he'll hurt ya'll...when I don't do nothin. I don't even pay much attention to it. Like a couple of times. Female. Yeh. The teacher sees me as an intimidating person. No, well, yes, my principal treats me differently. She holds us to a higher standard. Like, Black males, more so, because like she sees us as the future. One time, when she saw the Black males were not doing anything on the Black history program, so she made us learn a speech, Hey, Black Man. Yes, every time, we say the school pledge.

I was concerned after listening to Haaken and his disturbing perception of how teachers perceived him. I was also concerned about the behavior of the teacher. Haaken experienced a negative encounter in his school environment that hinged on bullying rather than racism. There was a large number of Black students in the school he attended, about 85%; therefore, the teacher's class mentioned above had Black students in it, and the class heard the exchange between him and the teacher. Because there were Black students who heard this encounter, the conclusion could be drawn that the teacher may not have been focusing on race or insinuating anything about his size. I took great effort to surmise from Haaken if the teacher was exercising humor, but it appeared there was no relationship between the student and this particular teacher. Haaken addressed the damaging encounter with a respectful resolution of simply ignoring the comment; however, it is with certainty that the disapproving comment left a lasting, damaging impression.

Further, Haaken revealed that his principal treated him differently as well but in a manner of demanding more from Black students. The example he shared pointed to a deficit the principal observed, and it suggested other students were already actively engaged in the Black history program. However, he surmised that Black males were not going to be allowed to do less than anyone else because they were required to uphold a certain standard.

Ingenious's perception was neither optimistic nor encouraging. He was certain that Black males were treated differently:

One of my teachers thinks I'm bad because, I guess because of how I look, but I'm really not that bad. Because like I don't really be doing nothing in class. I ask her simple questions and she gets an attitude. Instead of being like not yelled at, they could like talk to us instead of being mean, like harsh. Sometimes. She's partial to females. Others don't do that. We are like friends, not friends, but, they like everybody. Some she responds the same way. Most of them she don't. Um, she holds us to high standards. Like she keeps us in check by like if we have our shirt tails out, looking sloppy and bad at school, she'll make us put our shirt tails in because being not being dressed right will affect how people look at you.

Initially, Ingenious evaluated his behavior and believed one of his teacher's interactions with him was related to his appearance. His beliefs were similar to Keen who believed the tone teachers used changed when addressing Black males. According to his interview, there was not a clear distinction between how Black girls were treated. He mentioned some girls had a similar experience. When asked about how his principal treated Black males, he had a more positive response. His response was related to appearance, like Haaken, but specifically about appropriately wearing clothing.

Unexpected Findings. Generally, community, institution and family member, mentor, and sibling support were minimally identified in the study as a support to study participants. These groups did not seem to be of great influence to middle school Black males. The study found the connections with the community were limited to a few churches and no primary institutions. Study participants pondered and struggled to express any supportive advantages and significant impact of either group.

Mentors. From answers to interview questions about mentors and role models, a subtheme emerged—extracurricular activity, specifically athletics. Students identified sports figures or coaches as their mentors. Initially, seven students identified their parents as mentors. Because information about parents was sought through other questions, students were prompted for an alternative response. Four identified a sports figure as a mentor. In addition, six students identified sports figures as role models, and two students stated they did not have role models.

Keen recognized a coach as his mentor. He stated:

He's a very important factor in my life. Not only has he done a lot of things to get me out of trouble, he taught me everything I know and sports and also taught me a lot about being a man, so I'm really grateful to him.

Mr. M., the coach, took on an integral role in his life and demonstrated role model qualities.

Keen stated that he saw his role model practically every day because Mr. M took him home from football practice. This relationship was bonded more because of Mr. M's son, who is on the same team with Keen. He said, "Sometimes his son and I play video games. We go fishing. One time he took me hunting." Keen identified a role model who had impressed upon him a balance between athletics and other sports. Further, Mr. M. allowed Keen to travel with him to different basketball games. In addition to athletics, this role model talked about the future: "He's always

asking me where I'm going to go from here." Finally, this role model did not solely focus on pleasurable events; he built Keen's work ethic by allowing him to work around the house cutting grass and completing other chores.

Judge chose an 18-year-old male as his role model. He stated that JT was his role model and explained, "He picks me up and takes me to the gym to make sure I'm not losing my shot or nothing and he'll come check on me from time to time to see how I'm doing." Similar to Keen being favored with a mentor who assisted with sports, Judge's mentor also focused on his academic progress: "He asks me about my grades, and we'll play games." Surprisingly, this role model was able to dedicate a wealth of time to Judge. When asked how often he saw his role model, he stated 3 days out of the week. This role model was attentive to Judge, and he maintained regular contact. "He'll call me, and we'll play the game and sometimes I'll go to their house and we'll play games."

Role Model Identification. Throughout several interviews, topics about sports figures and athletic aspirations emerged. Several students provided famous athletes as role models. The students admired sports figures and justified these figures as logical choices for role models because they attended college before they were recruited and drafted. As a secondary question to identify other prospective role models, all students were asked to identify role models with whom they had personal contact. Two of seven mentioned are outlined below.

Brainy stated:

I don't necessarily have a role model. I do have people that I would like to be like when I grow up but that's not career-wise, for example, my favorite basketball player, Kevin Durant. When I was smaller than I am now, I used to watch most of his games. I want to do the moves like he does. So, I try it the next day or as soon as I can and try to do those

moves and pick up on like when he turns around and puts his back to the goal and tries to jump and hits it. I tried to do that too. I don't really look at people and say I want to be like that. Not nobody, like, I be around. Steph Curry. He's an athletic role model, but he went to college so that's the same.

Brainy, like many young males, wanted to emulate the physical dexterity of a famous athlete. Brainy did not address any particulars about Durant's personality, his academic accomplishments, his family, fame, or career. His focus on Durant's basketball skills could indicate his admiration of his command on the basketball court. Brainy's explanation does not explain why Durant was his top role model, but he realized that Durant had to exert great work ethic to perform as he does. Therefore, he attempted a similar effort by emulating him.

Learner, who was not an athlete in school, chose a sports figure as his role model. He explained:

I look up to Quinton Williams who's in the NFL. He motivates me because he came through a lot like his family was poor and didn't have enough money to keep him in school and some way he got away from other people and now he's a professional football player.

Learner was motivated by a role model who had experienced struggle and adversity. He acknowledged Williams as a true human with human characteristics. From this role model, he gained an understanding that separation from some people might be necessary to reach one's potential. Learner chose a role model who embodied similar athletic notoriety as Durant, but Learner delineated between the two and provided more reasons as to why Williams should be lauded as a role model.

Ingenious identified the same sports figure as a role model as Brainy:

My role model is Kevin Durant. He had to have good academic achievement because he went to a good college. He finished college... Yes ma'am. Like, in order to go to the NBA like he did, I got to make good grades like he did so my academics got to be good to go to a good college and be scouted like he was.

Ingenious, similar to Learner, had a stronger basis for choosing a sports role model. He identified reasons for choosing Kevin Durant and specifically mentioned the caliber of college he attended. In addition, he made the connection between making good grades and receiving college admission. Ingenious understood athletics alone was not sufficient for scouting and recruitment. His perspective of a role model was more comprehensive than Brainy's and comparable to Learner's.

RQ2: What behaviors do Black male students in a high-poverty rural middle school perceive as supportive to their academic achievement?

Research Question 2 allowed high-achieving Black males to describe their perceptions of the various inputs from their social and physical environment. Study participants believed that Black students could be academically successful. High achieving Black male students described how the combination of their motivations, level of confidence, influential instructional practices and strategies, and friend network helped to foster academic achievement. Interview questions in this section focused on the way individuals react to various inputs from their social and physical environments and the concept of self-regulation.

Positive Self-Image. Positive self-image is awareness and perception of one's potential and assets (Simel, 2013). These perceptions of reality are built over a lifetime and continue to change as we change (Simel, 2013). When actualizing positive self-image, the individual

engages in positive thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about self (Simmel, 2013). Participants in the study possessed consciousness of their self-image.

Fabian described himself as follows:

I think about myself. The pros and cons of when I do something good. I think about the ends and outs. I will think about what will happen if I didn't pass. I'm already confident. I'm just confident. I just think I already had it. I knew what I could do...I don't rely on other people for confidence. I feel like I was born with confidence.

Although Fabian struggled to respond to the question, and it had to be rephrased, he was acutely aware that he was competent and knew his own abilities. He displayed characteristics of self-reliance. His mind was set squarely on envisioning a future with confidence and without the need for support from others. Although he entertained the thought of past successes and good grades, he believed his abilities were innate. Fabian struggled with connecting his confidence to any specific entity or person and gave himself the credit for building the foundation of his confidence. His confidence was observed in the classroom. While his teacher shared a guided reading activity, Fabian focused intensely on the assignment. He wrote thorough answers and received compliments from the classroom teacher. When given a chance to respond, Fabian proudly read his answer that included all components the teacher was seeking. The teacher's confirmation of the right answer was met with a broad smile from Fabian. He continued to work on his assignment in a manner to complete it perfectly.

Brainy shared a comparable account of his self-confidence:

I haven't had any problems with confidence. Well, yes, other than when it comes to speaking in front of a bunch of people. Like, the day you wanted me to speak in the cafeteria. Part of me was like, 'dang, do I really have to do this?' And the other part was

like, 'keep walking, hurry up, yeah you'll get through it' and that really made me feel better because even though I didn't want to do it knowing that I had to do it, and if I was going to do it right. I mean if you sound bad, people are going to tell you that, but if you do good, people are also going to tell you did good. So, I said I'm going to try my best. So, I got up there the first day, I was real like worried, worried because I was in front of the whole school and even with the programs and stuff, I get butterflies and stuff in my stomach. And I say I practiced for this a long time, and I don't think I'm ready, but I'm on stage now, so I might as well go ahead. I'll probably be like maybe dragging around a little bit. But up there, you got a bunch of people watching you...it feels like even more eyes are watching you although it is just your students and your friends, especially your friends paying attention to everything you're saying, and it's like dang they're looking right at me. So I'm just going to keep this paper and make sure I don't stutter or trip up or nothing, I get through with it. It was like the first day after that, it was like wow, I did it. It's like, for example, jumping in a pool for the first time. Like after all these times of saying "I'm going to drown," and "I don't know if this life jacket is going to bring me backup" and you finally jump in and when you come back up, you say, "wow that wasn't bad," And I was like, "I can do this again. I'm ready," and then you like do it again for the rest of that time; it's not even scary to get up there and do it.

By engaging in self-talk, Brainy defeated his doubts and performed a task he did not think he could tackle. He contemplated his friends' thoughts, pondered the outcome from both positive and negative positions, and then resolved to perform a task. While he contemplated protecting his image, he devised a plan to increase the probability of successfully completing the task. In the end, his self-worth was not in question. From this one feat, Brainy likely gained the

confidence to advance to greater challenges because he conquered what he thought was an impossible undertaking.

School Pride is a subtheme that emerged under positive self-image. According to Canny, “One big thing I did was get into the school. I was confident that I can get in, but I wasn't sure. But once I got into school, it gave me confidence and made me feel like I can do anything if I can go into one of the smartest schools in Alabama, and I can be what I want to be.”

Canny's acceptance to a magnet school was pivotal in increasing his confidence. The grades he received in the past gave him a sense of self pride, but being accepted to an institution he considered elite bolstered his self-confidence. Canny was challenged to attend a school designed for students who were more intellectual. He tested his confidence outright by placing himself in a position to be evaluated for acceptance. In addition, he knew the new setting would expose him to unknowns and potential challenges.

Brainy was a talkative seventh grade student who "talked out loud" about his experience with developing confidence:

I was supposed to move this year, but I wanted my grades when I go to the next school to be all right. I wanted to move to the next school with A's and B's, so if I came from a magnet school, they would be like, “He's smart. He came from a magnet school. He's got A's and B's, so we won't have a problem with his academics.” But if I came back with a C or something, they be like, “what did you learn at that school you went to?” I wanted it to reflect good on the school. The project I did for Mrs. P on cells. When I brought it to school and I started to present, the kids were like, “you really did a good job.” It felt good to hear people say that like that. It just makes you want to do better than what you did.

Embedded in Brainy's response was the same message conveyed by Canny. They both felt a sense of school pride, but more so, they felt a sense of elitism by being selected to attend a magnet school program. Brainy understood he would be viewed differently if he transitioned to a new school with the title of magnet school associated with his name. This perception showed his ability to think strategically. In addition, his pride was evident in the caliber of work he presented. Finally, his peers reinforced his existing confidence with positive affirmations.

Although he used few words, Genius outlined a list of reasons for his confidence, and he related one to school pride:

Got good grades and got opportunity to come to this school. I went up on my Scantron.

Very few people in my class were on an honor roll, and I did STEAM week. Matt and I had to talk. At science exhibition, we had to get up and talk.

Genius recalled several reasons for his growing confidence, and like Brainy, he too had a bolstered self-confidence when he was accepted to the magnet school. The good grades preceded his entry to the school. Genius also associated independence with confidence. He pinpointed two examples when he mastered a feat that was accomplished by only a limited number of people; he was proud of his accomplishment. Public speaking was an area of growth for him as well because he recounted having to present verbally at a school program as a proud moment for him.

Positive Friend/Peer Network. Canny responded to an interview question about what made him connect with his friends, what they said about making good grades, and how they encouraged or discouraged him:

I think it's the way we think about life because we are all on the same path, but going different ways...like we all want to be successful, but we don't want to be successful in the same group, like they may want a different job. We like to play sports. We all tried

out for football this year on the same team because we felt that if we tried out this year, we would make it because next year if we start this year, we'll have a better chance of starting next year because all the seniors will be gone. It'll give us a better chance of playing. We're like, "We're going to make good grades." Friday, when I presented for Mrs. P, we're like, "I hope that we make 100." When we walked up to her and asked what grade we made, we made a hundred. We both made the same thing.

When asked how his peers encouraged him to work harder in school, Canny replied:

Sometimes when we have homework and stuff, sometimes they be like, "It's too much to do. I'm not going to do that. And I do it." That part is discouraging because they're trying to stop me from doing something. When we do things in the gym, on stage, and stuff, they try to discourage you by laughing and stuff. That's how they discourage you based upon what people going to think. But, I do it anyway.

Canny connected with his friends in the sense that they were like-minded and goal setters. They strategized to achieve athletic goals, but the example he shared of when he stepped away from his friends for academic-related tasks showed that his friends were not as supportive. However, he was not discouraged by his friends' responses. He continued with his goals regardless of what they said, so although he was connected with friends, they were competitive and not always encouraging.

Genius had the following to say regarding positive friend network:

Studying with each other. I'll go around people like J. He's a good student. He doesn't use bad words. I feel like people need to be around like selective breeding. Selective breeding is when you select the type you want to breed. For example, I select the type I want to

hang around. Personality. They can't be disrespectful. Got to be nice. Can't be a follower.

You must be a leader. No, I don't really play that game [Playstation] anymore.

Genius used the scientific term *breeding* to describe how he connected to friends. He was a critical observer of others, and upon evaluation, he determined whether he believed they were comparable to who he was. If other students passed his intellect and profane language evaluation, he accepted them into his circle of friends. When Genius looked at his friends, he wanted to see a reflection of himself.

Astute's response was similar to Genius's as to why he connected with friends and the level of encouragement he received from them:

I don't be around people who get in trouble or try to act cool and do crazy things. I'll be around people who don't really get in trouble. No, ma'am, because that's not going to be with you in the long term. I really don't play games for real. "Hey, we finna do a good job. We need to bring up our grades. We ain't gonna be able to play football. Hey, you get your homework?"

Astute and Genius were focused on choosing friends who were similar to them in character. Popularity did not appear to be at the top of their list. Like Genius, Astute found it acceptable to be distinctive. Astute and his friends were concerned about their academic success; they motivated one another to perform at a high level. Neither Astute nor Genius found playing video games with friends of great significance.

Keen had a slightly different impression of the friend connection and how they motivated each other:

Sharing the same thing, like video games. That's the main thing and sports. They just vibe together. Like my friends, they act the same--meaning they are very uplifting and always

in good spirits, and I like that...laughing, joking, talking. We say things like, "What's up with that grade bro? Man, sometimes I just don't know." Sometimes it be like, "I don't know how I got to be that great." He'll say something like, "My teacher's tripping." I always keep it real, and say, "No man, that's you." They're teaching; you just need to pay closer attention. And he's like, "Yeah, you're right." I tell him just talk to him [the teacher] after class or something and get some extra tutoring. I told him ain't nothing wrong with it. They encourage me. My closest friend, he likes me and down with me. But it is for me to work harder. He'll sometimes say, "Man I'm better than you," and I will say, "No, you're not." We will have a huge argument about who's better in this class and who knows more about this and that, so it's like a competition...so it makes me work harder. Cuz, I don't like losing.

Keen and his friends were critically competitive but not in a harmful way. Keen enjoyed jousting in a nonthreatening, playful manner. Their competitive nature extended from video games to the classroom. Competitiveness was not a commonality with Astute, Canny, or Genius. Keen and his friends supported each other by offering honest, objective feedback when the other needed it.

Fabian, Keen, and Judge had the commonality of a jovial nature. This commonality connected them and their friends. Fabian talked about his experiences:

We all have a different sense of humor. We like to laugh at each other. We like to stick together. They are honest and have generosity. We might compare our grades to see who made the highest score in each subject and we talk about why we got the grade, and we try to help each other find out why the answer was wrong. We say, "What you got?"

When asked how his peers encouraged or discouraged him to work hard in school, Fabian explained:

None of my peers discourage me not to work hard. We all motivate each other. We help each other go over things that might be on the test before the test. Sometimes we will call each other and talk about vocabulary words. Yes. I observed them and math team practice and they want you to hush. I don't know. I'm on their team. Jealousy. They told me to be quiet, stop buzzing, you're too fast.

Fabian established relationships with friends in a manner similar to Keen. They were competitive and desired to achieve academically at the highest level. Fabian collaborated with friends when they fell below their academic expectations, but then he competed for the highest ranking above them. Fabian exercised respect for their opinions and used it to accelerate his performance. Keen was held in high esteem and may have been the envy of his friends as they playfully squabbled in competitions. Fabian was uncertain of how to interpret his friends' jabbering. When asked about his interpretation of some comments he has been subjected to, he indicated they might be jealous of him. This perspective was not positive if his friends were indeed jealous; however, the perspective may be viewed positively if jousting was their way of indicating that they hold him in high esteem.

In math class, Keen interacted with his young, nerdy-looking teacher in an attention-seeking manner. Because he had a strength in math fluency, he was able to respond more quickly than most students. Instead of Keen waiting until his name was called to respond to questions, he called his teacher's name at least three times in a 30-minute time frame. After his teacher gave him a positive check for the correct answer, he smiled and looked around as if to see if others were watching. Keen also desired the principal's attention and sought support at his desk to confirm if he had correctly responded to a question.

Both Judge and Keen have a penchant for laughing and joking. Judge recounted many reasons for his choice of friend network:

School and sports. We're in the same class. We talk to each other. We joke. They have sense of humor. We motivate each other. Sometimes I laugh out in school...we go to each other's house and do homework and projects. I basically have known them my whole life. We play games. We both laugh for no reason at all. We're just used to being around each other and just got closer. We know we got to make a good grade. Sometimes we tell each other we need to study oh, so all of us in our class will FaceTime each other. Sometimes we say we know we're not getting below an 80. They encourage me to work harder and tell me I can make better grades if I stop...and I laugh too much and don't take some seriously. They'll be like you got this and be good.

Judge connected with his friends for various reasons. Academics was at the center of their relationship along with laughter. He also highlighted longevity of the relationship as an important piece. In both areas, friends offered him redirection. When he was off task with his assignments, they encouraged and redirected him. When laughter interfered with his performance, they redirected him. Like many other study participants, Judge bonded with his friends over sports and technology.

Learner connected with friends who had commonalities with him. He explains below:

Some of my friends I've been knowing since we were younger. Some I just met last year and we formed a strong bond...Just their character. Some of my friends just want to do great or want to do better or help people or their families. When we talked about making good grades, me and Matt for example, we were saying we got to get done with ACCESS [online class]. We were helping each other out in ACCESS; we were behind. I was just

striving to finish. Thank God we're finished. He would say, man you better go ahead and there and get done because if you don't, you don't have to do it at Hillside High. So that just drive, make me strive to go ahead and get finished because I don't want to do it next year.

Learner, like Judge, valued longevity in friendship as a key connector; however, when he changed schools, he realized that longevity was not the only quantifier for friendship. Learner experienced a supportive connection with those who encouraged him to complete assignments and with his peers, who outlined the pros and cons of finishing a task. Learner and his friends talked about and compared not only their grades but also their current level of performance.

Positive Family Support. A continuing theme of positive parent support emerged in the Behavior Experiences section of the interview questions. Study participants identified how their parents supported them with their friend network. Canny noted how his parents supported him:

My parents only know some of my friends but the one they do know they think they're good kids. They know four or five, but don't know six or seven because I'm not around them that much. I like the three or four they know, I'm around that my games and stuff.

Canny's parents were attentive to his friend network enough to evaluate whether or not they were suitable for friendship. His parents were limited, to some extent, in making judgments about those friends who were not present, but his parents approved of the friends they knew. Canny's parents were aware of who some of his friends were, but Canny had limited access to his friends.

Brainy explained that he has friends; however, they are limited in their exchanges:

My parents have an influence on me and who I hang around. My grandma and my auntie, she lives next door to me. She works at a local technical college, and she knows some of the kids; so she calls my grandma, tells her not to let me go to the park or stay around

them too much because...they likes cursing or fighting...Whether I like it or not, if my grandma tells me to do it, I'm still gonna do what grandma says because she knows what's best for me. No, my grandma does not let them come to my house. She said she doesn't want a kid there whose parents gets mad if she disciplines them if they do something like break something. She said she does not want any problems with any parent unless they are like real close to the family. She don't let me go to their house either, and I don't want nobody saying anything to other parents anything about your behavior if you happen to slack off at their house or jump around or bother anything. My Paw does. He won't let me hang around anybody that may influence me to do something wrong. Paw knows one of the parents of one friend.

This set of grandparents had strict control over who influenced their grandson. They were not acutely aware of who his friends were, but they exercised jurisdiction over how he may be influenced by them. The grandparents exercised control over the extent to which others could bring about any changes in Brainy's life by controlling his time and freedom. The support he received was positive in that he had guardians who wanted to protect him and his future. Brainy accepted the authoritative role the grandparents played and accepted their approach to setting boundaries.

Astute presented a similar scenario to Brainy's: "We really don't do anything. Cuz we ain't old enough to do anything yet." I viewed Astute in a similar light as Brainy in the sense that he had limited contact with friends outside of the school setting. His acknowledgement that his age prevented him from indulging in extra activities beyond the school day suggested that his parents set boundaries and time frames for which children his age should be among peers. As with Brainy, the positive parental influence was shown as one of protection.

Keen, who lived with his father, had limitations with friends, but not to the extent that Astute and Brainy did:

[Dad] likes all my friends but my mom, she's always picky about who I have as friends. She likes to get to know them just to make sure I'm around good people. [Dad] knows everybody because basically he knows all of their dads. I know I'm around good people, not hanging around the wrong crowd. [He] always tells me to stay away from bad people.

Keen's primary parent, his Dad, had a greater awareness of his friend network and his friends' parents. The mother's absence placed her at a disadvantage with awareness of who the friends were, but she communicated with Keen about the types of friends she expected him to have. Keen's awareness of his parents' expectations helped him to grasp the boundaries he could not exceed. Like Astute and Brainy, Keen's parents managed to control the amount of influence peers could have.

Judge's parents identified what made his friends acceptable. They gave specific characteristics that were acceptable for friends, which were likely the same characteristics their son displayed. Judge explained, "They think they are good respectable young men. They said they like them because they made good grades and they're respectable." Judge's parents were cognizant enough of who his friends were to give descriptors of how they viewed them. His parents pinpointed respect and academic focus as two positive characteristics Judge's friends possessed. These parents obviously viewed their son through the same lens. The way they viewed Judge's friends suggested that they would not be accepting of other friends who displayed characteristics unlike those of his current friends.

Learner's parents were critical of some of his friends. According to Learner, "My parents say some of my friends try to fit in with the crowd, but I don't. They say some of my friends just

want attention. They told me to keep my circle small.” Learner's parents were aware of his friends and observed them, but they did not necessarily view them favorably. Learner’s parents’ directions to him to keep his friend circle small was an indication that they desired for him to set his boundaries with people like the ones they described. His parents verbally expressed a dislike for characteristics of self-gratification and preferred a more selfless type of friend connection. Learner’s parents were also highly aware of who his friends were, and they established preferred limits on the number of friends he should have, a boundary which he accepted just like Brainy and Keen.

Epitome explained how his mother was vigilant of his activities with his friends:

I just say I'm going to do something. She'll say, what are y'all trying to plan? No, we just talk low in the back seat of the car. She does say anything about any boys or girls. Not many come to my house. Like Des comes the most. Only for my birthday do a lot of people come.

Epitome’s mother was aware of who his primary friend was because his friend was often physically present with Epitome and his mother. Since Epitome and his friend were together frequently, this situation indicated that she accepted who the friend was. However, there were no descriptions of the friend's personality as Learner offered. Epitome’s mother expressed neither her discontent nor her acceptance of Epitome’s friend; therefore, it was unclear whether she had definite boundaries about her expectations. In addition, it was uncertain whether the mother or the child established the boundaries about the number of friends with whom he engaged.

Ingenious described his mother’s reaction to his friend’s behavior over an incident that occurred:

Like the other day, my momma said you better not ask me no more to come over to his house...he did something very bad, and my mom found out and my momma and my cousin's momma were talking about it, and they was like the person's parents shouldn't be happy about that or don't care. The person I'm talking about should take consequences, but he didn't take or get no consequences for what he did. She said they are a bad influence on me. They could be a bad influence cause like some of the stuff they be doing ain't called for. They do too much for real. Uhuh [laughter]...no ma'am

Ingenious's mother was aware of one situation about his friend's behavior, which she viewed unfavorably. Her discovery of the act led her to label the friend as a bad influence. Eventually, her displeasure regarding the friend's behavior required her to separate the two to the extent that she banned the friend from her home. She offered clear restrictions when she did not allow the friend to return to her house because of his behavior. From the parent's standpoint, some behaviors were unacceptable.

Overall, parents of study participants offered restrictions when expectations were not met. Conversely, the parents offered support when expectations were met. Participants responded to the interview question, "What's your parents' response when you do not do well in school?"

Astute described his mother's response to when he produced a less than stellar academic performance:

She says I'm not going to play that game, but I really don't play that game. I don't normally get too low grades. At the beginning of the school year, she understood because it was like a new environment. But when we got toward the middle, if it [grade] was a C, it wasn't that bad and then toward the middle I didn't make any Cs. But after midyear she said no more Cs. Most of the time I did well. I didn't get whippings because I didn't get in

trouble, but if I had done bad I would have gotten a whipping. When I was eight...A report card, like if I do good, I can get some money and go to Atmore watch movies or arcade or bowl.

Astute's mother set restrictions when expectations were not met. However, his mother was understanding when he transitioned to a new school setting. Her expectations were that his coursework would be more difficult, but over time, Astute would be required to improve to peak performance. At the same time, she rewarded him when he had good grades. This parent kept his life balanced and helped Astute understand that there were consequences for good academic performance and poor academic performance.

Keen described his parents' tendency to discover reasons for a poor academic performance:

It will be shocking because they don't expect that from their child, and they always have a reaction to it...Like sitting down, talking about it, why I'm not doing good, and they always contact the teacher. What's been going on, like is there anything new, something going on with my friends that they need to know, or I just didn't get the lesson. They are not what I would say laid-back. They are going to be angry; they'll be mad. They want to know the reason why, and they're going to find out what's really going on. Yes, they put me on punishment, take my phone, games...My Dad even tells me to sit down with him and study. He'll ask me different questions.

Keen's parents appeared attentive to their child's academic position. They were concerned about him in ensuring he performed well in school. When Keen was disengaged, his parents approached it positively and did not leave the burden of improvement on him solely. They were not dismissive of his behavior when he was less focused, but they sought to discover the root of

the issue by probing into possible reasons for his poor performance. Although his parents were supportive, their emotions complemented their discontent, and their response was to remove the possibility of distractions. When asked, “How do your parents reward you?” Keen replied, “Sometimes it is with money; sometimes it was just saying, ‘great job, son.’” They gave him money for every report card, and the rest of the time, he received spoken words of encouragement. These parents made adjustments to offer rewards when appropriate.

Fabian's parents, who lived separately, rewarded him for good school performance as well. They gave Fabian money as Keen's parents did for Keen; however, the frequency and stipulations were quite different. Fabian explained:

Sometimes when report cards come, I get congratulations for having all A's. Like \$20.

Momma gives it. My dad will sometimes take us fishing if both of us [his twin] make the honor roll. We both have to make that on our own. I don't need to get rewarded. The reward does not motivate me to do it.

Fabian mentioned his father's contribution to his academic performance more than his mother's contribution. He had a unique reward system. Because he had a twin, his father gave tangible recognition only when both he and his brother performed. Fabian and his brother did not attend the same school, but his father's expectations were the same. Interestingly enough, Fabian stated he does not require rewards for performance. His parents were instilling in him not only self-motivation but also a consideration for his sibling's status as well.

Learner's parents used the provision and removal of privileges as motivation for academic performance:

Their response is if I don't bring it up or do better, they'll take something away from me, a privilege I have at home like football, playing video games, or watching TV. It can be intense sometimes, but other times they'll say something like, "Do better next time."

Learner's parents had the same reaction as Keen's parents when he performed poorly--removal of possible distractions and time-consuming activities. They believed the method for discipline was to remove privileges. These parents also believed in discussing their child's issues with varying levels of emotions, and they expressed expectations for future performance. Learner also explained how his parents rewarded him for good performance:

By giving me money, take me out someplace, give me a gift card, clothes, shoes, a lot of ways. I wouldn't say often, probably, every two months. Like at the end of every nine weeks.

Driven's mother's reaction to poor academic performance was different from that of the other participants.

It will be bad. If I get a super-bad grade, I'll get a beating. I have not gotten a whipping in a long time. Yes, I haven't made bad grades in a long time. She buys me shoes when I make good grades. Mom knows I like shoes. I just like Jordans.

Driven's mother's initial method for punishment was physical, but because he continued to meet her expectations, he had been spared from punishment. This parent also rewarded her child based on his interests. He felt driven to continue to make good grades because he would be rewarded with things he liked. Ingenious's parents provided monetary rewards for good academic performance:

They give me money, and when I make a good grade on my test, she will take me to get something to eat. I also get play station games. They used to be \$100 for the whole year, but you can pay for it every month. You should be able to pay every 3 months.

Unlike Fabian, who was intrinsically motivated and demonstrated work ethic without incentives, Ingenious received incentives of money and games for good grades.

Positive Teacher Support. Study participants were asked the questions, “What strategies do teachers use to help you persevere through challenging material; what strategies do teachers use to help you build confidence, independence, and remain focused?” “How do teachers respond to you when you are disengaged from teaching or exhibit behaviors that impede learning?” All the answers supported the theme of positive teacher support.

Canny described some of the strategies his teachers use to support him in his academics:

Mrs. P, she does a lot of stuff to help me out. She gives us a project every nine weeks.

We could do it in groups, but she said we didn't have to...If we get up there, and we are presenting, she asks questions about what does this mean, and what does this mean, and how does this happen, and how did that happen. So, you have to elaborate off of that and describe it. With Ms. S, if we are reading a book and all of a sudden I'm not reading the book, she'll call me out and say, “Canny, you're not looking at the book because your book is not even open.” She'll just call you out.

The teachers in this example were supportive in various ways. One teacher challenged Canny by giving him major assignments. Both teachers were observant of him and aware of him in class enough to know when he was not engaged. They ensured that Canny was actively involved by redirecting him when necessary. Both teachers used cooperative grouping and posed questions that evoked elaboration and thinking.

Canny gave his account of these teachers:

They support me by giving me more than one chance to achieve my goals. If I make a bad grade, they'll give me another chance to do it. Mrs. H. gave us candy and stuff to support us. Sometimes Mr. L. when we have like two bad days, because we don't know how to do the work, the next day he looks up on the Harbor Cam videos of the math. They give us speeches about how good our lives would be if we do go to school. If you want to be a lawyer, you just go to school, go to college and be a lawyer. Mrs. H. when we are not engaged and not paying attention, she moves us. Ms. S., she calls our names, and if we get it wrong, she gets our attention.

Canny's teachers used various methods to engage the students, from rewarding them with treats to giving different chances to improve grades. The teachers were diligent in their efforts to move students forward. They knew their students personally and called them by name. They also wanted them to experience success, and this desire is noted in discussions about their futures and reteaching information with which the students struggled.

Astute described some strategies his teachers implemented to address students' classroom conduct and to support their academics:

When we are in class and we keep being aggravating, she'll say, "stop, stop, stop." And she got aggravated one time and hollered and gave a long speech. Ms. M and Ms. W. give these long speeches. And Coach too, long speeches and push-ups. Like whatever you're doing. Like working on a project, they won't help us. They will just give us hints. With Ms. W, we always have songs. It helps on the test. Mrs. M. uses carousels. Group work. We did Makerspace challenge. We made a chair...if it's somebody you're always talking to, they'll put you on opposite sides of the room. They make faces...she puts her

hands on her head and sit at her desk for a couple of minutes and then she comes back. I got kicked out twice. There was a book we were supposed to have read, and I told her I did not read it, and she asked me a question, and then I said, I gave an answer and she kicked me out. It was real, but I didn't say it like it was in the book.

The teachers employed auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learning modes as instructional methods. They also used problem-based learning and collaborative strategies. The expectations were evident when they incorporated corrective speeches and when they took on a facilitator role and guided students to devise an answer rather than providing it. One teacher also allowed students to observe the frustration of being a teacher, a scenario which helped the students understand her human nature. These teachers made it clear that students were not exempt from corrective actions when they failed to perform. They received consequences for actions that appeared unbecoming.

Learner recounted his experiences with the strategies his teachers used to support him academically:

Like say, I did turn something in late, they may allow me to make it up or not take off as many points...also, using words to encourage me. We took end-of-the-year test...we work till we meet our end of year goals. Every day I walked by Mr. L's room, he kept telling me I needed to get more points this time. I got 2800 points. Algebra was a challenge. Mr. L. gave different websites for everything like Edulastic and Quizzes. He had put stuff in Google classroom, gave us formulas on a daily basis...stuff we can look over and understand. We'll cover extra material, tells me if I don't understand, to ask them any time during planning...PE time to come back, and we can go over it during Enrichment class. Teachers say, get back on task, and they going to make contact with

parents. Or they'll send you to the office. I was never sent to the office. When he sees me with my Chromebook, he just come over and close it and say, "pay attention." Ms. S had something on the board, and I was on the Chromebook again, and she said close the Chromebook.

These teachers had a comprehensive outlook in their approach to gaining student mastery of concepts. According to the script, they desired for their students to learn. Beyond learning, they were encouraging and extended learning opportunities when students did not grasp concepts. These teachers sought avenues for independent learning as well as opportunities to work one-on-one with students in an enrichment setting. Finally, these teachers used parents as a supplement to address issues that required additional assistance.

Haaken expounded on how he received support from his teachers:

Coach N, every time we'd have a progress report, he would tell me, "let me see your progress report," and if I don't have good grades, oh, he was going to make me do something at practice, and then Mr. L, he will let you come back in and finish so you have a good grade in his class. Same thing with Mrs. H. too, she will let you like, well not all the time but sometimes, she would come in it and say you have some Acellus missing; she will let you work on it during PE to catch up.

To help persevere through challenging material, Haaken stated that his teachers used Kahoot quizzes in science, ck-12, and another instructional tool that is called A-plix. He was asked if his teachers' talking helped him. His response is below:

No, they can take talking out. It takes me out of class and makes me not want to be there. I prefer they just give us a piece of paper with specific instructions, and we do it. The teacher talking does not help me. Yes, a lot. Yes, take notes, read the book...there wasn't

that much technology. A-plix, that's just about it. Sometimes we get on Legends of Learning. They don't really help. They just keep teaching...Mr. L., we learn a new skill every day. They [teachers] told me they believe in me. They tell me that I know you're smart enough to do this and that. You're just not applying yourself. They don't really build my independence. Because like everything we do, we have to do it as a group. Sometimes depends on what we're learning because if it's Hands-On. If the teacher is talking, that's not going to keep me; it just makes me sleepy. To redirect me, they say, Haaken, get out of "Lalaland." You should have went to sleep on time. This is not Club School. Mr. L, he don't really say nothing. He just go to screaming. He says, Haakennnnnnnn. Haakennnnnnnn, I'm gonna tell Mrs. B.

Brainy, Canny, and Learner, along with Haaken, were all recipients of the same instructional practices. Haaken identified more with technologically based resources that the teachers used. Haaken, Brainy, and Learner all expressed the leniency teachers gave to make-up assignments; the improved grades on made-up assignments helped the students reach their goals. Like Learner, Haaken received impactful, motivational support from his teachers. With the regular checking of the progress report, the teacher established a pattern of concern for the child. Haaken humorously described how his teachers refocused his attention to school tasks. The laughter he shared as he explained the process indicated that he had good relationships with the teachers. Haaken also indicated that teachers did not help him gain independence, and he identified his desire for some teaching methods to change.

Teachers possess a strong influence in children's lives (Sarac & Tutak, 2017). Some teachers made more of an impression than others, and students learned and remembered more from those teachers. Study participants were asked to give examples of teachers who fit this

description. Seven students, or 58% of the participant pool, identified one specific teaching strategy they believed helped them learn. This section highlights two teaching strategies, one of which is a specific teaching strategy the participants believed helped them learn.

Brainy described the teaching strategies implemented by his teachers and why he preferred one over the other:

I used to be real good in math with Ms. W. but in Mr. L class, it was a lot harder. It was a step up. I was used to Ms. W's class, but he teaches in a different way. So, I would get it, but the next day, I'd be clueless...because of his way of teaching, like he go through it faster. And takes it a long way. I was used to a short way. I miss Ms. W. She took a shorter way. Then, like if we don't understand it, she would say, "Okay, come up to the board," and she make us explain as far as we could get. Then she will take it from there, from where we got stuck. She would take it from that spot and look at it another way and tell us what we did wrong and how to fix that and what to learn for the next time so you don't make that mistake again. And then in her classroom, we still made songs, so I got to remember stuff for sixth grade. I know that doesn't sound like we were learning anything, but it stuck because of the songs, and we had Flocabulary.

Brainy favored the teacher who provided expedited ways to complete math problems. Because he was successful in math with his sixth-grade teacher, he expected the same results the next school year. There was a learning curve for him with the teacher transition. Brainy also benefited from individualized learning when his teacher required him to demonstrate his level of understanding in problem-solving. He noted that the teacher would intervene when needed. The teacher showed interest in the students' performance level, and her interest played a key role in

how much students gained academically. In addition, Brainy mentioned music as a memorization strategy his teacher used to help him learn.

Fabian also compared the teaching strategies of two teachers and why he preferred one over the other:

Last year, with Ms. W., she would take time out to make songs, so we can remember and learn at the same time and have fun. But my teacher this year does not take time out to help everybody, but he does extra activities to help us retain the knowledge. Ms. W. uses video, songs, and games, but with him, he uses Kutaworks and Edulastic.

Fabian and Brainy agreed that music helped them learn math and science content. Brainy discussed how music incorporation was fun and how it helped with memorization. Again, Fabian paralleled Brainy's thoughts when recalling the time Ms. W. spent to assist all students. He compared the teacher's individualized assistance to the use of technology to teach.

Learner also indicated his preference for one teaching style: "Last year, we were trying to find a math teacher when Ms. S. left. When Ms. Pill came, she went over slope every day and made us all sing; that helped us understand it better." There was a consistent agreement that the use of music helped the participants learn. Learner, Brainy, and Fabian all expressed the link between music and achievement. This teacher was able to bridge the gap between the students' interest and instructional pedagogy to bring about a desired outcome. Repetition and music helped Learner retain more knowledge.

Driven expressed his opinion about different teaching strategies and how he coped with them: "Some teachers move too fast, and you really have to pay attention. Other teachers take it slow, and when you don't get it, they take time with you. I think they are about equal." Driven desired for his teachers to take the time to teach content to help him remember. He believed

pacing was key to understanding. Brainy and Driven had a similar perspective with regard to the teacher's giving priority to breaking down information without advancing at a quick rate. Driven did not leave the total responsibility of his learning to the teacher; he acknowledged his efforts were just as impactful. Driven believed that the interaction of the teacher and the student brought about great results.

Epitome compared the teaching strategies of his teachers and his preference for some strategies over others. He explained, "Some teachers go more into detail and tell you how. Some just kinda give it to you. In Ms. W, we made raps and things to help me remember. When you test, the songs come to my head." Epitome, like all participants mentioned above, recounted music and scaffolded instructions as primary strategies to aid students' learning. Epitome sought a strategic approach with descriptions and explanations instead of exploratory learning methods. He seemed to desire guidance and support from the teacher rather than being dismissed to discover information independently. In Ms. W's class, there was a greater reliance on the teacher for guidance.

Ingenious described his preferred teaching strategies:

In science class, we did a song, "Biodiversity." It was easier to learn. Remembering the song helped me make a good grade. We do projects, make models of atoms with peers, and it was fun, fun to work with peers, helped me to learn easier.

Ingenious shared that music helped him in science class. In addition, he pinpointed collaborative learning as a strategy he enjoyed. Ingenious believed that learning was less complicated with the incorporation of lyrics and classmates.

Astute described the teaching strategies of two of his professors and the strategy he considered most effective:

Like whatever you're doing, like me working on a project, they won't help us. Ms. W. and Ms. M. will just give us hints. With Ms. W., we always had songs. I remember more from Ms. W. because she breaks things down. They both break things down, but Ms. M. is more strict. If, like, one or two people in the class don't understand it, they give one-on-one.

Astute interjected the idea of independent, exploratory discovery learning approaches. He did not suggest that he struggled or desired this approach to learning; however, he indicated that he learned through this method. As with Brainy, Epitome, Learner, and Ingenious, music was interwoven in the classroom to assist with memorization. Further, he explained how his teacher simplified a topic by outlining the steps in an incremental manner. Driven and Brainy agreed with Astute that individualized, teacher-led instruction was preferred.

RQ3: What personal factors do Black male students in a high-poverty rural middle school perceive as supportive to their academic achievement?

Research Question 3 informed the creation of interview questions for the third category of the interview protocol. These questions enabled me to ask the participants about personal experiences with elements such as behavioral capability, outcome expectancy, emotional coping responses, self-efficacy feelings, and other thoughts and cognitive factors that were influential to the participants' behavior and supportive to their academic achievement. Below is a discussion of the themes that emerged from an analysis of the responses to RQ3.

Themes of Expectancy. Canny used specific strategies to assist him with understanding new content. He expected great rewards from his educational attainment:

I use index cards, and I put them on a silver ring. I'll write down facts, and then I flip them and study them. In English Language Arts, I write down definitions and parts of

speech. In math, I write down formulas; and in history, I basically get a map and then study on it. In science, I use my cards. It's not as easy; it takes time.

In his interview, Canny stated that remembering some material was not easy. He described the specific strategies he used to improve his memory. He identified methods that helped him learn. Canny expected to receive positive academic returns from implementing these methods.

When asked about his view on education regarding its prospects of providing better opportunities for his future, Canny responded as follows:

With education, you can achieve anything. If you stay in school, you can achieve anything that you want. When you graduate, you can get scholarships, which will provide you with the money you need for college. Scholarships pay for your books, and it makes it easier. All you have to do is go to school and work hard, and you have what you need for your career.

Canny had a solid perspective on what is required to be successful. He expected his attention to academics to result in scholarship opportunities that would provide him opportunities to attend college without being preoccupied with financial concerns. Canny believed his future success hinged on his ability to learn as much as he possibly could as a middle school student.

Keen identified strategies he uses to acquire the new content that is taught in school:

I'll look it up on the internet and find any information that's valuable to me. I always look it up on the internet and find any information that's valuable to the lesson. Yes, it was challenging. I talked to the teacher. He gave me one-on-one help. That was very helpful.

Also, we used a website to explain what was going on.

Keen experienced challenges with learning new content. He gained confidence through independent internet searches as well as websites the teacher identified. He sought visual

representations to support his learning base. The strategies and practices he utilized helped him in the past, so he expected continued progress. Inarguably, he identified that one-on-one assistance was beneficial. When asked about the prospect of education providing a better opportunity for the future, Keen said the following:

My mom always tells me you will not go anywhere without education. It's hard to find a job without education, and she said education will take you a long way, so I always keep that in my head if I want to be successful in this world, and I want to have a good living; it's going to take an education to have that kind of life. Every night when she gets off work, and I see her every weekend.

Although Keen did not live with his mother, he could feel his mother's voice in his response. She connected education directly to prosperity and a good life. Furthermore, the message his mother gave led him from a confining perspective to an open-world outlook. In Keen's response, having an education predicated ideal employment. Canny and Keen's perception was that success was connected to getting an education. They expected great returns from an education.

Genius shared two simple but major strategies to acquire understanding of newly presented information. He explained, "I just pay attention. I watch the way the teacher breaks it down. Technology helps us." In non-elaborate terms, Genius outlined his method for learning new content. He utilized the expertise of his teachers, who introduced concepts, and he observed their methods of problem-solving. He understood that there were steps to follow to reach a desired answer. In addition, he had access to a personalized Chromebook, which gave him immediate access to technological resources. Genius expected his teachers to master teaching of subject content; their expertise would provide him with the information he needed to learn. Further, Genius believed his education was paramount:

This is where it starts. Education takes you a long way. For example, like, Coach asked, “Would you rather get a million dollars in respect or money?” I say respect because respect will take you a long way, just like education.

Genius believed his education will not only help him in the future but also provide him with extended opportunities available only to degree-holding people. Interestingly, he compared respect to education and positioned respect above money. He did not note that money will accompany a good education, but he appeared to have the idea that the value of money is less than both an education and respect. Education was the route to reaching destinations according to Genius.

Haaken had a similar perspective as Genius as it related to the strategies that he applied to learn new concepts. Haaken stated, “I pay real close attention when a person is teaching it. I take notes too. I might take a picture if it is allowed of the work. That's about it.” Haaken indicated that learning started with paying attention first, but he used notetaking as his main strategy. He noted that learning was easy for him. So, it appeared that he had a strong academic foundation, and his cognitive abilities were proven when he encountered new content. Haaken also used visual representations to complement his learning strategies. He and Genius shared the same expectations about the positive results that accompanied paying attention to a competent teacher.

Additionally, education was important to Haaken. He expected it to provide him with life's amenities:

It will make me know how to react to certain things, and it can get me through life. When I go to college, if I am good at what I major in, I can get a job making more money than a lot of people and provide for my family.

Haaken believed education to be a powerful advancement tool that would pave the way for a better life. The route to the life he imagined required completion of college and being advanced above others who shared the same major/profession. This profession would place him in a distinguished position and separate him from others, giving him prominence. Because Haaken would be in a prized category of performance, his ability to provide for his family would be greater. Haaken's perspective about education was comparable to Genius's in that he believed education would allow him to advance to promising destinations.

Coping. These middle school Black males used coping strategies to sustain their academic status and GPA. They made modifications, received rewards that altered their performance, and observed situations they may or may not mimic. Astute gave an account of the modifications he made:

Astute made observations of his peers. Some observations led him to modify his behavior. "If someone gets a better grade and better rewards, it encourages me to work harder." In the case of rewards, Astute was enticed to improve school performance to get better rewards. Astute also observed his teachers, and though some observations may have left an impression on him, he was selective in what he would mirror. He believed his family values and "home training" should determine if he should emulate a behavior: "I don't really mimic because I have home training. I know what not to do and what to do." It is ironic that Astute mentioned how he was driven by what he knew was right because he did not apply the same tactics when he did not perform at a high level: "I don't change my study habits. I should have studied." He proclaimed, "I promise myself I'm going to keep my grades up...I ask for help sometimes...don't do it by myself. If I can't do it by myself, I'll go and ask for help." Astute was influenced by some behaviors, and he had the capability to determine what outcome he wished to receive.

Keen, too, had outcome expectancies like Astute. Keen explained how he coped in different situations:

I look at the ones I got wrong. Then, I ask how did I get it wrong, and I just sit there and think about it until I figure out what the right answer is. If it's like a regular little minor test, I will study it like 30 minutes, but if it's major, oh, I'll put more effort into it.

By having a tutor, really. Someone who understands a lot better than I do and ask for help. My dad is my tutor. He's good at everything.

Keen did not look to peers or rewards to modify his learning potential like Astute. The mere desire to achieve drove him. He was independent as he sought for understanding of content he failed to completely master. He began with internalizing his errors and then he endured until he found understanding. In addition, his family was available to help him cope and assist him.

When asked about mimicking behaviors of teachers, he responded as follows:

I chose to mimic by using my knowledge and what's best for me. Yes, their attitudes toward the kids. They always have a good attitude. When they are laughing and joking ... that's what I want to have.

Keen, a light-hearted, jolly athlete, pinpointed characteristics in teachers he would emulate because they were similar to his personality. He enjoyed laughing and joking, so he appreciated teachers' good nature and positive attitude. Laughter was an unexpected coping strategy this young man used.

Judge explained the connection between rewards and academic achievement. He elaborated further on behaviors he would mimic: "Rewards make me do well. I do it so I can get more awards. No, I work for myself, but it makes it better with the reward." Judge talked about his study habits and how he modified them when he did not achieve at a high level. He

explained, “I just do it more; my mom said you just can't study one time and think you got it. Sometimes I have people to ask me questions to make sure I've got it.”

Judge remembered his mother’s advice about concretely embedding information in his brain. Therefore, he studied and restudied learning materials. He also utilized his family to quiz him upon completion of his study time. Judge and Keen had a commonality of family coping strategies. Their parents took an active role in ensuring the success of their children.

Learner addressed how he modified his study habits when he did not perform at a high level and how he acquired new content:

When I perform at a low-level, I modify them by changing three days to every two days because I know I have to study more if I want to do better. I write notes and write songs down...like the quadratic formula, quadratic equation, and this crazy formula that he wrote on the board, I wrote three pages of notes down so I can understand it.

Learner persevered through the learning process and understood that more complex topics required more time and effort to grasp. When he mentioned the extent to which he took notes, he implied that changes lead to success. He modified his study habits based upon his previous performance; Learner was introspective and had a desire to improve as Keen and Judge did.

Positive Self-Image. Self-efficacy is the belief in self and the ability to succeed (Sarac & Tutak, 2017). Self-efficacy is very similar to confidence because confidence is the belief in oneself as well. Study participants were asked about their level of self-efficacy and how it prevents them from accepting grades lower than a B. They also identified their source of confidence and how they believe they gained it. Their responses are discussed below.

According to Ingenious:

I gained my confidence from my friends telling me you can go somewhere when you get older. You gon' be good. From like, people saying that you're better than me and stuff. I'm like naw man, don't say that. Then again, in my mind, I know that I am. Yeh, I don't wanna say that cause I don't wanna bring nobody down...I ain't trying to be no bragging person. The only time I brag is in academics. I don't brag in sports. Like my momma, got it put in my mind that a C is not good at all. So, every time I see a C on my paper, my heart drop. I don't know what that is, but I get disappointed, sad, sometimes, like I don't like C, D, or F's or zeros. Something in my mind makes me be scared of C's. I don't know what it is.

Initially, I assumed Ingenious's description of how he gained confidence was related to academics; however, by the end of his response, he revealed that his refrain from bragging was in reference to athletics. He maintained humility while realizing he was gifted athletically. He had confirmation from his friends that he was a talented athlete with potential, but it did not appear that he relied on their confirmations. Nevertheless, Ingenious had difficulty explaining his self-efficacious beliefs in detail. His mother's expectations intertwined with his beliefs and these expectations prevented him from falling below a B average. Ingenious's confidence was established by his mother, and he accepted her expectations and lived up to them.

Keen expounded on his self-efficacy beliefs:

By just being willing to put the extra work in, because at the end of the day, my mom always tells me "you're a leader" and my dad also says, "you have to follow before you lead." So, I know some people who look up to me, and I have to always be on my A-game, so if I'm down, it can affect them. I cannot let them see me down. I have to stay up and keep myself motivated.

Keen's self-efficacy was heavily influenced by his parents. His parents instilled concepts of leadership and work ethic in him to the degree in which I questioned if he experienced pressure with having people look up to him. Keen was rather confident and took pride in being elite and a role model. I questioned how he will remain self-motivated in situations when he failed to meet his goals. His reactions and response to being seen in a dimmer light by others may present emotional effects. Keen felt a sense of responsibility to set the path for those who admired him. He presented a clear example of self-efficacy:

The interview question was rephrased for Haaken. He clarified his source of confidence from his perspective:

When I learned I was good at something, I gained confidence. When people started telling me, "You good. You can do this. You can do that," that starting making me get confidence. Grandma. Yes, it make me, like, when I get a grade lower than a B, I be, like, disappointed in myself because I know I can make a grade higher than that, and I know I have made higher than that in the past. I'm not trying to be a C student, so don't start, like, believing you a C student. It's not ok to make lower than a B. So, I'm, like, saying to myself, like, installing in your brain, it's ok to make a C when it's not. You still a B student, an A. Nothing under a B is ok.

Haaken exercised positive thinking. He had high expectations of himself. At the same time, he gained confidence through family members. So, he was internally and externally motivated.

Haaken also used self-talk when he fell below his goal; and when his goals were not met, he consciously attached a negative emotion to it and convinced himself to remain focused. Because he had confidence in himself and a high degree of self-efficacy, he admonished himself and positioned his mind for success:

Judge described his perceptions of his sources of confidence:

My teachers...they'll tell me I'm good doing good. If there's something like I didn't think I could do and I do it, they will say I knew you could do it. I don't know how to answer that. I just believe you can do anything you put your mind to.

Judge also struggled to identify his source of confidence and self-efficacy. After pondering, he identified teachers as the source and later stated that the concept is a mental one.

Genius gave an example of self-efficacy:

Self-efficacy is www.genius.com. I also watch construction, the history channel, and by trying and talking to myself. You can do it if you try. When your confidence goes down, when you tell yourself you can't do something because it looks hard does not mean it's hard. I promise to myself that I'm not going to fail. I promise to myself that I'm going to learn. I believe in Genius. if you don't make a good grade, you're not turning that game on.

Yes, I say if you keep playing the video games, you're going to be the same if you don't make changes.

Genius' confidence was internalized and verbalized. He invested in himself and his cognitive development by spending time with topics of interest. He was similar to Haaken in the way his internal monologue drove him to modify his behavior. Genius was mature in the sense that he understood what prevented him from positive efficacy. He used self-discipline to decide what actions he must change in order to achieve success in school.

Brainy described how he gained his confidence:

It started by at the beginning of last year when we had those Roman numerals on our jacket or shirt and we had to walk around and find out who had the same number and we

had to find it for myself so we have to show people what number we got even if the number was wrong. And they didn't even mind. It was, like, fun. It was "oh, I got this one wrong." It helped me to just walk up to people that you don't even know. You don't know them and they probably don't even know you. In Ms. S.' room, when I got up in front of the class, people were laughing at the stuff I had on the slide, not at me, and that made me feel good, and the slide that I made up myself.

Brainy's confidence was boosted by first time experiences, and it seemed that when he completed them, he gained greater confidence and efficacy. He also found confidence after being placed in positions to conquer his fears, positions that forced him to confront situations that were unfamiliar. Brainy received positive feedback from each experience that heightened his self-efficacy. In addition, his confidence improved because of the positive energy. Although he was initially hesitant to participate in these activities, he will likely be more accepting of new experiences and challenges in the future.

Canny described how he gained his confidence:

It came when I found out I made it into the school. Once I found that out, I knew I could achieve anything academically. [In the past], I had good grades. I never received a C or below and I wanted to keep it up. That was my foundation. I felt driven to keep doing as good as I could. I guess it came from extra work to ensure I knew what I was doing. If we do science in class, I would watch a video on it or something. That brought me confidence because it would help me to pull up my grades.

Although Canny had experienced success with maintaining good grades, he experienced increased self-efficacy when he received an acceptance to a magnet school program. Canny was already demonstrating self-regulation with maintaining good grades, but appeared to harbor low

self-efficacy. The opportunity to join this group of enterprising students gave him a sense of elitism. This change interrupted the potential self-doubt he embodied initially. He was now in a position of demonstrating a higher sense of self-efficacy, which required greater effort.

Analysis of Findings

This study's findings revealed six themes. These themes best reflected the commonalities among participants. A summary of each theme is described below.

Positive Family Support

The nature of family support voiced by study participants included recognition of both parents and grandparents, but more references were made to mothers. Participants identified parents as supporters and their reward system. Each parent promoted high academic expectations, family values, and future career expectations. For example, one participant, Haaken, expressed that his father desired for him to take his education seriously so that his education would take him beyond a blue-collar job and enable him to take care of his family when he becomes an adult. His father's expectation was that Haaken's future would provide more of a promising career than his father's current job as a truck driver. Because of parent support and regular encouragement with incentives, these middle school Black males perceived their parents as supportive toward their education generally and academic work specifically.

The participants also reported positive parental support with paying for school fees and supplies. This role was an expectation for most students. One participant responded that his mother did not pay for his school supplies because he had a school sponsor, but all other participants indicated their parents provided for their needs.

Apart from providing encouragement and supplying school fees, some participants viewed their parents as instrumental to their educational attainment and current level of academic

functioning. For example, one participant shared that his mother took additional steps to ensure he gained understanding of new content by researching additional information to provide him with worksheets. Another student indicated when he did not perform at a high level, his father completed homework with him. This interaction helped students develop positive relationships with their parents. It also advanced them academically to prepare for more advanced challenges. One hundred percent of these middle school Black males perceived parent support positively.

These findings on positive family support aligned with the literature, which asserted that parents can advance their children toward greater academic success (Hayes, 2012; Jensen & Minke, 2017). As their children's first teachers, parents provided support that was foundational to the stability of the educational attainment and future of these young men (Warren et al., 2018). Per Leithwood and Patrician (2015), parental engagement influenced the disparities in family backgrounds and socioeconomic status. Parents' expectations for children's academic performance, parenting style in interacting with their children, level of parental engagement in their children's schoolwork, etc., provided intellectual and social capital that is key to their children's academic performance (Fuentes et al., 2019; Garcia & Serra, 2019; Leithwood & Patrician, 2015; León-del-Barco et al., 2020).

Although the literature also revealed that some parental practices, such as being very controlling, exposing children to conflict (Swanson et al., 2012), observing the children's class, and even contacting the school about the children's behavior, etc., could negatively impact their children's academic progress (Robinson & Harris, 2014), I did not arrive at these findings in the analysis of the data. Admittedly, the parenting style of participants regarding their academics varied, with some parents being stricter than others; however, participants generally found the parenting styles they were exposed to were supportive rather than hindering. Some practices that

participants identified as supportive to their academic achievement were parents' financial support, parents' expectation that students maintained a strong work ethic toward their studies, parents' willingness to give rewards as incentives to study, conversations about school work, and inquiry into possible reasons for participants' less than stellar performance in school. For participants, these practices conveyed to them that their parents wanted them to succeed and were willing to do what it took to guarantee their success.

In this study, one of the most consistent contributors to middle school Black males' achievement was parental support, especially maternal support. Analyzing the data from the 12 participants revealed that mothers had varying levels of responsiveness to their children's schoolwork or academics. Study participants with mothers who showed active interest in their academics tend to be more directionally focused and vocal than those whose mothers did not. Mothers who expressed intellectual expectations for their sons encouraged their boys to persevere in school as these mothers clearly believed in the benefits of having a good education (Suizzo et al., 2014). This study found that the participants' mothers engaged in positive parenting practices such as being participants' role models, serving as mentors, and primarily being their verbal supporters. Additionally, the role participants' mothers played in fostering support for their academics also aligned with the findings of Suizzo et al. (2014) that African American mothers strongly identified with the determination with intervention model that outlined high academic expectations for their children. Unlike Mexican mothers who were content with their children attaining high school diplomas, African American mothers expected their children to surpass them educationally and attain graduate degrees (Suizzo et al., 2014). This high expectation that African American mothers have for their children explained the willingness for participants' mothers to use the intimate knowledge that they have of their

children to find winning combinations of rewards and punishments to keep their children focused on their academic goals. This level of parent responsiveness, especially maternal, produced a positive connection between motivation, cognitive development, achievement, and school success (Bandura, 1986; Suizzo et al., 2014).

In a few cases, some participants' mothers were neither actively engaged in homework nor did they review class work. Neither did these mothers visit their sons' schools. However, for each study participant, maternal reverence remained the center of their discussions about academic supports, thus suggesting a positive connection between these males and their mothers. In sum, findings from the study pointed to the importance of parental encouragement and support in students' academic success.

Positive Friend/Peer Network

In addition to positive perceptions of parent support, most participants had positive perceptions of their peer network as it related to support of their academic work. Positive perceptions of peers and positive friend network both revealed examples of encouraging academic support and classroom contributions. Whether students used competition or direct words of encouragement, study participants appreciated their relationships with peers. One participant expressed how attuned peers were to him in class when he failed to understand content and how they volunteered their assistance. Interestingly, only one participant revealed that his friends did not support him. His comment was aligned with Burke and Sass (2013) who reported a lack of consensus on the influence of peer interaction on academic achievement. Therefore, 92% of participants perceived peer support positively.

Black males chose peers based on similar interests in extra-curricular activities and video games. The primary extra-curricular activity in which participants were involved was athletics,

specifically basketball and football. Participants also engaged in competitive sports on video games through PlayStation. PlayStations were used as communication tools as well; students utilized them as cell phones. Participants and their friends meshed because they had similar interests. These students had solid bonds with their friends and enjoyed the comradery and competitive atmosphere. Because of their exchanges, participants viewed peer networks positively.

From a behavioral perspective, participants and their friends mirrored each other in cognition. Participants' friends were also high-performing students who shared similar goals about achievement. In addition, participants' interest in athletics and video games improved their emotional connections with their friends. A therapeutic effect can be directly tied to their relationship. So, the dominant trend was seen in similar behavior and personality.

Participants described the significance of having relationships of longevity. Some participants maintained relationships with peers because of the amount of time they had invested in the relationship. Two participants revealed they had grown up with their current friends and maintained the relationship because they shared similar personalities, which is the basis for why they initiated their relationship.

The theme of positive friend/peer network was one that aligned with the literature. Duriez et al. (2013) found that student interaction with peers and the social support offered by peers reinforced elevated motivations and goal setting. This finding was consistent with the study participants' admission that they relied on their friends to keep them motivated in class and pursuing academic goals. Instances such as Canny's reliance on his friends to remind him of assignments that were due, the tutoring Brainy received from friends when he did not understand certain concepts taught in class, or the willingness of Keen and Learner's friends to keep them on

task and even collaborate on completing difficult assignments so they would not fall behind in their grades, all pointed to social support that is vital to students' academic success (Song et al., 2015; Wentzel & Asher, 1995). These positive friend/peer networks also fostered students' learning interests and learning strategies (Ariani, 2017), triggered intellectual curiosity, increased learning efforts, reduced test anxieties, and improved academic achievement in general (Cirik, 2015).

It should be noted that these positive friend networks were only possible when participants harbored a high acceptance level for their friends (DeLay et al., 2016). Participants' perception of friends' behaviors as highly acceptable played a role in their willingness to emulate their peers' behavior and allowed their friends to influence them academically. Kassarnig et al. (2018) noted that individuals valued the opinions of peers who have attained achievements that the individuals consider desirable; I also identified the positive impact of the achievements of peers on a student's performance. This willingness to alter behavior also aligned with Bandura's (1986) assertion that individuals will emulate behavior that they perceive as valuable, in which *valuable* in this sense referred to the positive consequences associated with the behavior and the alignment of the behavior with the desires of the individuals. Likewise, when individuals do not value the behavior or the outcomes of that behavior, they are less willing to adopt the behavior (Bandura, 1986, 2008).

Positive Teacher Influence

In this study, teachers were lauded as being memorable when they invested time in pacing strategically taught lessons with explicit steps. Overall, teachers were respected, appreciated, and considered supportive when providing academic and non-academic supports. In several examples, participants mentioned the incorporations of specific strategies that improved

their learning. Further, some participants agreed that teachers supported them with non-academic issues. For these reasons, study participants positively perceived teachers.

Some Black males perceived their teachers as advocates for academic success. For example, one participant recalled a teacher spending additional time with students during the teacher's planning period to reteach standards. Moreover, on the one hand, some participants recalled teachers reviewing their progress reports prior to the end of the school day, and offering advice for improvement and congratulations for the week's accomplishments. On the other hand, one participant candidly reflected on a teacher who spoke against him in a setting among younger students. This experience changed how he interacted with the teacher from that moment. In a separate, negative recollection, one participant believed his teacher held a deficit-based view of Black students. Therefore, positive and negative stories about participants' experiences with teachers were voiced, but the majority of these stories were positive.

Participants' perception of teacher support was mixed; some participants believe that their teachers treated them differently based on their race while others do not. According to the literature, factors such as teachers' attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs about the academic potential of Black male students often impacted students' academic success positively or negatively (Archambault et al., 2012). Gest and Rodkin (2011) asserted that teachers' perceptions of students shaped the classroom social environment, which in turn directly contributed to important academic and social outcomes. Teachers' positive attitudes were transferred to students and eventually impacted students' motivation, encourage engagement, increase self-worth, and increased sense of school belonging (Ross & Bruce, 2007). An instance when some participants felt that they were treated differently included Canny's perception of teacher's use of unequal practices in the classroom that resulted in his being punished for playing a game while his

Caucasian classmates who were also playing a game were spared. Similarly, Genius reported that his teacher sent him out of the classroom for being on YouTube while his Caucasian peers who were also on YouTube were allowed to stay in the classroom. These participants attributed the differences in the way they were treated to their races. Despite these accounts by some participants of being treated differently because of their race, other participants reported that they had not experienced such differences in treatments by their teachers. Brainy, for example, did not believe he was treated differently by his teacher; he believed he was treated the same as everyone and only had positive experiences with his teacher.

It should be noted that participants did not always consider being treated differently as negative. Some participants reported a difference in the way they were treated, in terms of the high expectations that some teachers had of them behaviorally and academically. The participants believed that these high expectations represented their teachers' belief that the participants had the capability to achieve academic excellence, hence the expectations that the participants work harder. Participants identified people in the school environment who had these high expectations of them as the School Principal, the coach, and some class teachers. These high expectations that these school personnel had of the participants contrasted Rojas and Liou's (2017) findings that classroom teachers lowered learning expectations for Black male students because the teachers pitied the life challenges these students go through. Likewise, these high expectations also contrasted Garibaldi's (2007) findings that teachers had lower academic expectations of Black male students and even lower expectations that these students would go to college.

Positive Self-Image

Alongside positive parent support, a positive friend/peer network, and positive teacher influence, all participants conversed about their positive self-image. These middle school Black males had a healthy identity that developed from past successes and from reciprocity of family, school, and peers. Their positive self-image pushed them to accept challenging material and to expect a successful outcome.

Some middle school Black males could relay how they developed self-confidence and self-efficacy. The prevailing idea was that their confidence was innate versus a development from external persons or practices. They explained in several instances that they were born with confidence. Self-efficacy was a difficult term for them to apply to their lives and schooling, even after I shared an explanation and definitions. One participant eventually revealed his self-efficacy would not allow him to entertain the idea of being a C student. He knew he was an A student, and his mind would maintain that thought. Another student explained that his self-efficacy encouraged him to put the extra work in to achieve high academic status. He expressed that self-efficacy was predicated on leadership. These Black males were adamant about their academic promise. They emphasized how important it was for them to determine their destinies; therefore, they took ownership of their identity and image. Participants' positive self-image built their self-efficacy, enabling them to pursue and achieve academic goals (Bandura, 1995). The participants' self-efficacy can also be related to findings from the literature that students who felt a sense of belonging have a greater chance of experiencing an optimized learning environment than those who do not; being accepted, included, or welcomed in social relations leads to positive emotions (Sari, 2012).

Expectancy

Expectancy played a significant role in the achievement of Black male students. Participants were influenced not only by their own expectations about learning but also by those around them. Expectancy was particularly important in the context of learning. Haaken, Canny, and Learners' high expectations improved their performance. When participants expected to make high grades, they often received the desired outcome. Haaken truly believed that he could achieve anything and failure was not an option. Once his mindset was established, he began to view problems as challenges to overcome rather than insurmountable obstacles. In Haaken's, Canny's, and Learner's cases, expectations can influence perceptions of experiences gained from performing specific tasks.

Participants and their parents expected a good education to provide a promising future and job security. When parents and students had expectations, students rose to the expectations. How well teachers expected students to perform also influenced participants' outcome. When teachers told participants to increase their points and to return to the classroom to complete assignments, an expectation was presented.

Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) explained that when certain behaviors were expected, we are more likely to act in ways that make the expected behavior more likely to occur. So, for example, a student who has high expectations of himself will probably spend more time preparing, just as a teacher will spend more time encouraging students to work harder when they expect high performance.

Coping

Students applied coping mechanisms when faced with obstacles, thereby, showing individual human agency (Bandura, 1977). Humans are agents, proactively engaged in their own

development, making things happen by their actions (Bandura, 1977). Coping suggested that humans have influence on their environment through co-existing properties of intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness (Bandura, 1986). This study's participants made modifications, received rewards that altered their performance, and observed situations they might or might not mimic. Astute, Judge, and Keen were able to anticipate the consequences of different events and regulate their behavior accordingly. With the capacity to anticipate or exercise forethought, they were able to see ways that may eventually improve an unproductive issue.

Alignment of Study Findings to the Social Cognitive Theory

This research study used the SCT as its theoretical framework. This theory was chosen because of its major tenants and because the theory aligned with my view about children as engaging individuals who alter and are altered by their environment (Bandura, 1986). Based upon the theoretical framework by Bandura, SCT has three postulates that influence behavior: behavioral, personal, and environmental. The Behavioral postulate involved events and preparations that lead toward learning. Thoughts, interests, and ways of thinking were inclusive in the personal aspect. In addition, the personal postulate included the significance of mentoring and how modeled behavior was likely to be emulated (Dowden et al., 2014). This aspect of modeled behavior focused on learning through interactions, observations, and performance. Personal factors included cognitive processes, goal setting, self-regulation, and learning strategies (Bandura, 1986). The environmental postulate was the degree to which students involved themselves in each dimension that determined the degree to which academic performance was impacted (Bandura, 1986). The classroom setting, where students encountered their teachers, made up a portion of this postulate.

The SCT "favors a model of causation involving triadic reciprocal determinism" (Bandura, 1989, p. 2). Behavior, personal, and environmental factors interact and influence each other. An example that supported the theory was the theme of family support. As the theory suggested, some influences were stronger than others (Bandura, 1989). Because parent support was evident in environmental, personal, and behavior aspects, it appeared throughout the interview responses but was less evident as a personal factor. The major links of parent support to achievement were noted in environmental and behavioral experiences.

The theme of positive family support pervaded as an environmental factor contributing to academic achievement as perceived by middle school Black males. Parent support included reliance and encouragement. Parent support was evident in behavioral experiences in response to their children's high and low performance, along with a reward system. Family support was also revealed in personal experiences with building students' self-efficacy.

Considering environmental factors such as social norms and influences on others and the environment, study participants received continuous support from family members. Eleven of the 12 participants lived at home with one or both parents, and one lived with grandparents. The participant who lived with grandparents maintained regular contact with his mother and planned to transition to another state to live with her upon the completion of the school year.

Participants identified their parents as their role model. Mothers specifically were recognized as the primary model of imitation. Parents supported participants by paying fees, assisting with homework, and offering daily routine checks at the conclusion of the school day. In turn, participants responded to parents with respect and acceptance by acknowledging the contributions they were provided. Parents also supported their children with ongoing reminders of their expectations, making the students more aware of the expectation that goals would be

accomplished. As a result, student behavior was regulated. Participants' behavioral changes were regulated by parents' influences and responses. Parents' feedback served a function toward achievement.

Peer network was secondary in the study of perceived perceptions of environmental factors that contributed to middle school Black male achievement. Study participants recognized friends as positive and supportive in and outside of the classroom. Yet, participants refuted observational learning from peers. Participants' daily functioning appeared more self-regulated than being influenced by others. There was less dependence on participants' input for academic success than there was from their parents. Burke and Sass (2013) reported that peers may not improve academic outcomes.

From a behavioral perspective, participants and their friends mirrored each other in cognition. Participants' friends were also high-performing students who shared similar goals about achievement. In addition, participants' interest in athletics and video games improved their emotional connections with their friends. A therapeutic effect can be directly tied to their relationship. So, the dominant trend was seen in similar behavior and personality.

Although their behavior was less shaped by the beliefs of their peers, cognitive collaboration improved more with academic tasks, resulting in improved relationships. Also, peers improved their focus on academics when other peers were engaged with them. Bandura's SCT states that individuals are able to cognitively process their psychological practices. As such, participants first acknowledged their status of weakness or lack of focus in this study. In turn, students confirmed their peers witnessed the off-task behavior and offered advice to regulate actions that led to improvement (Duriez et al., 2013).

Rooted in SCT, personal experiences are mental processes and the understanding that humans are driven by expectations, coping responses, and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). Beliefs, thoughts, and other cognitive factors influenced participants' behavior. In the study, participants displayed forethought, reflective thought, and self-efficacy as they cognitively solved problems. The process of symbolization showed that people model observed behaviors (Bandura, 1986).

In this study, Black males applied self-regulation, another component of SCT. They were driven to make high grades, and when they failed to reach high performance, they internalized the issue with a negative emotion. Some participants withdrew socially and physically from parents to keep them from making the discovery about the poor grade. However, it was discovered that few modified study habits to ensure improvement, and few actively engaged in regular homework practices.

Participants also self-monitored and judged their practices for learning new and challenging content. Resoundingly, participants identified strategies like notetaking, cooperative group exercises, technology usage, and receiving individualized support as being most significant. Of all strategies reflected upon, two of the 12 participants identified pacing as being most important, six of the 12 participants identified individualized assistance as being most important, and the remaining four identified music as the most important. According to middle school Black males, these three strategies were most distinctive and improved cognitive capabilities.

Self-efficacy beliefs are a central principle of SCT (Bandura, 1995). Self-efficacy is an individual's judgement of their capability to execute a series of actions to receive a designated outcome (Bandura, 1986). Self-efficacy is foundational to human motivations, well-being, and accomplishments (Bandura, 1989; Sarac & Tutak, 2017). Bandura contended that self-efficacy

literally touches every facet of people's lives, including self-defeating or productive thinking. Self-efficacy involves one's level of perseverance in adversity and vulnerability to stress. Self-efficacy is critical to self-regulation (Bandura, 1986).

Optimistic and productive thinking were revealed when study participants were asked to reflect on sources of confidence. Participants voiced their innate abilities and gave credence to some external sources. External sources included comments from family, friends, and teachers referring to them as the best and being a leader. These comments evoked a sense of pride and created feelings of uniqueness or elitism.

Further, SCT emphasized acquiring knowledge from a social environment through reciprocal triadic reciprocity, an interchange among personal, behavioral, and environmental factors (Bandura, 1986). Through self-regulatory processes and vicarious learning, the development of a sense of agency arises (Bandura, 1989). The SCT explored processes of goals and self-inspection of progress, expectancy significance, self-efficacy, and social comparisons. In this study, the interplay between behavior, personal, and environmental factors brought about self-regulation and academic achievement for these middle school, Black males.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this qualitative interpretive phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of select Black male students who have been academically successful in a high-poverty rural middle school in the Southern United States. This chapter presented findings and analysis of the findings that emerged from my interviews with 12 Black male middle school students from a rural school in the Southern United States. The interviews focused on identifying the participants' perceptions of the behavioral, personal, and environmental factors that they considered as influential to their academic achievement.

Based on the data collected from the 12 Black males and a thorough analysis of that data, I arrived at six main themes that cut across the three research questions that guided the study. The six main themes that emerged were considered by participants as influential to their academic success during and prior to the middle school years; these themes were positive family support, positive friend/peer network, positive teacher influence, positive self-image, expectancy, and coping. Individually, each theme articulated a clear voice of these young men. Collectively, the themes reflected a comprehensive view of their identity.

I found that the findings support existing literature. The first finding, positive family support, is identified in the literature as a source of intellectual and social capital that is key to children's academic performance (Fuentes et al., 2019; Garcia & Serra, 2019; Leithwood & Patrician, 2015; León-del-Barco et al., 2020).

The second finding, positive friend/peer network, has also been identified in the literature to foster students' learning interests and learning strategies (Ariani, 2017), trigger intellectual curiosity, increase learning efforts, reduce test anxieties, and improve academic achievement in general (Cirik, 2015).

The third finding, positive teacher influence, has been identified in the literature as having an impact on students' academic success positively or negatively (Archambault et al., 2012). Teachers' perceptions of students shaped the classroom social environment, which in turn directly contributed to important academic and social outcomes (Gest & Rodkin, 2011).

The fourth finding, positive self-image, has been identified in the literature as related to self-efficacy, which enabled the participants to pursue and achieve academic goals (Bandura, 1995).

The fifth finding, expectancy, has been identified in literature as related to desired outcomes (Bandura, 1986). Reinforcements such as rewards tend to encourage participants to persist despite challenges.

The sixth finding, coping, has been identified identified in literature as related to making adjustments through self-regulation, an agentic approach (Bandura, 1986). Many coping strategies were developed through social and tangible rewards (Bandura, 1977).

The SCT, the theoretical framework for this study, postulated that people acquire knowledge based upon observation (Bandura, 1986). Human functions are not driven solely by internal forces or automatically formed by external stimuli. Humans learn through triadic reciprocity—skills and training (behavioral); cognitive, affective, and biological factors (personal); and school environment, climate, and student-teacher relationships (environmental; Bandura, 1986). Findings from this study concur that, collectively, these three factors influenced the academic behavior of middle school Black males. Following this chapter, Chapter 5 provides a summary and major findings, conclusions, interpretations of findings, implications of study outcomes, recommendations for future research, and limitations and reflexivity.

Chapter 5: Summary, Conclusions, Implications, and Suggestions for Future Research

This chapter presents a summary and the major findings of the study. The summary includes themes that emerged from the interviews of research participants at a rural middle school in the Southern United States. This chapter continues with a discussion of the study's conclusions, interpretations of findings, implications for literature, policy, practice, unexpected study outcomes, and suggestions for future research followed by limitations and reflexivity. The chapter ends with a summary of the main ideas discussed.

Summary and Major Finding

The troubled status of middle school Black males in primary and secondary education settings garnered tremendous attention on national platforms over the last several years, while the education of Black males has been a topic for the past four decades (Atwell et al., 2019; Harper & Wood, 2016; Howard, 2014). Over the last decade, the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP; National Center for Education Statistics, 2020) consistently illustrated achievement gaps in math and reading between Black male students and males from other ethnic groups. Black students' average reading and math scores were in the 28th percentile while those of White students were in the 55th percentile (Rowley & Wright, 2011). Researchers found that Black males were less prepared for college-level work than their peers from other racial groups (Engerman & Bailey, 2006; Palmer & Maramba, 2011). Further, the national average graduation rate of 84.6% was higher than the graduation rate of Black male students (Atwell et al., 2019). Lack of preparedness and disengagement were often recognized as factors that helped to explain high college dropout rates.

Studies documented multiple factors that prevented Black males from positively performing in school (Davis, 2017). For instance, researchers identified that Black boys were

disproportionately subjected to disciplinary practices (Alexander, 2015; Ross & Stevenson, 2018). Out-of-school suspensions were a predictor for future presence with the juvenile justice system (Ross & Stevenson, 2018). The long-term economic effects of low education levels on society were of considerable concern. Black students who fail to attend school or graduate from high school were more likely to be unemployed or poorly paid (Taylor et al., 2014). Disparities in income created a bleak picture for the dropout and the economy (Alliance for Education, 2018). Low education levels were also related to lower life expectancy (Caselli et al., 2014). Health effects resulted from low education levels because of lack of reasoning capability to critically analyze behaviors that led to poor health (Caselli et al., 2014).

White students' average reading and math scores were in the 55th percentile while Black students' test scores were in the 28th percentile (Rowley & Wright, 2011), and an examination of the National Report Card from 1992–2019 showed Black students in fourth, eighth, and 12th grades as consistently recording lower reading and math scores than White students (Cai, 2020). Further, the 2017 graduation rate for Black students was 77.8%, which was below the national average graduation rate of 84.6 % (Atwell et al., 2019). Research attributed this achievement gap to socioeconomic and racial disparities that impacted the school quality and educational opportunities available to Black and White students (Darling-Hammond, 2014; Kavelson, 2019; Legal Information Institute, n.d.) With a range of emotions that extend from sympathetic concern to widespread concern, researchers called for strategies in response to these problems. Typical approaches included matching students with culturally sensitive mentors. As researchers identified issues that complicated the academic success of these students, educators, administrators, and policymakers alike grappled with the question of what must happen to improve Black male student success.

Improving the academic success of all Black male students necessitates a school environment where they experience supportive learning supports. Accordingly, school leaders must purposely cultivate learning environments centered around students' lived experiences and promote a sense of self-efficacy (Brooms, 2019; Lopez, 2011).

When considering the difference in achievement levels between White and Black students, in addition to the learning environment, the connection between parents' involvement in their children's education is often considered (Kahlenberg, 2013; Morrissey et al., 2014). A number of research studies have explored the impact of parent involvement in student's academic success and found a positive relationship between such involvement and students' academic achievement. In an effort to encourage academic success and support, peers also play a pivotal role in developing students' academic identities and achievement.

The purpose of this qualitative interpretive phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of select Black male students who have been academically successful in a high-poverty rural middle school in the Southern United States. To accomplish this purpose, the study sought to answer the following topic-based central research question: What are the lived experiences of academically successful Black male students in a high-poverty rural middle school in the Southern United States? Specifically, the study sought to answer the following secondary subquestions that were developed based on Bandura's SCT:

RQ1: What factors in the educational environment do Black male students in a high-poverty rural middle school identify as supportive to academic achievement?

RQ2: What behaviors do Black male students in a high-poverty, rural middle school perceive as supportive to their academic achievement?

RQ3: What personal factors do Black male students in a high-poverty rural middle

school perceive as supportive to their academic achievement?

The long-standing academic gaps in reading and math between Black and White students have been attributed to socioeconomic and racial disparities that impact school quality and educational opportunities available to Black students (Darling-Hammond, 2014; Kevelson, 2019; Legal Information Institute, n.d.). Forty-five percent of Black students are enrolled in high-poverty, disadvantaged high schools compared to their Asian and White counterparts (Cai, 2020). Further, Black male students are ranked at the bottom of the achievement ladder in reading and math when compared to Black females, White females, and White males (Atwell et al., 2019; McFarland et al., 2016; Pitre, 2014). These statistics show that Black students are at a disadvantage economically, socially, and academically (Atwell et al., 2019; Casserly et al., 2012).

Research has not focused on the percentage of Black males who succeed academically (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). Studies have concentrated on peer influence, mentoring, and parent involvement (Kahlenberg, 2013; Morrissey et al., 2014). The voice of middle school, Black males on school achievement is rarely noted in the literature (Henfield et al., 2014; Warren et al., 2016).

The theoretical framework for the study was Bandura's (1986) SCT, a psychology-based theory that posits that individuals' learning and behavior is influenced by the interplay of factors within their social systems (Bandura, 1977). These factors which are personal (i.e., affective, cognitive, and biological), environmental, and behavioral, create a three-way reciprocal model that shapes, reinforces, or alters learning. Using SCT as a framework, educators can improve students' emotional conditions and improve their faulty self-beliefs and habits of thinking (personal factors), enhance their academic skills and self-regulatory practices (behavior), and

modify the school and classroom structures that impede student success (environmental factors). SCT can be useful with goal directed behaviors, helping to explain the interaction of personal and contextual factors influencing performance, which determines human behavior (Burney, 2008). Bandura (1986) explained reciprocal determinism as "What people think, believe, and feel affects how they behave. The natural and extrinsic effects of their actions, in turn, partly determine their thought patterns and affective reactions" (Bandura, 1986, p. 25). Per the SCT, people facilitate change as well as respond to change by weighing the merits of a behavior or action based on their own experiences and those of others and the consequences that arise as a result of those behaviors or actions (Bandura, 1986). This present study explored personal, environmental, and behavioral factors contributing to the academic success of 12 successful middle school males in a rural school in the Southern United States.

The methodology for the study was qualitative because it allowed participants to tell their stories, thereby allowing for an understanding of the study phenomena by exploring participant's experiences and the meaning of those experiences (Creswell, 2013). I used interpretive phenomenology as the research design to provide an in-depth analysis of participants' lived experiences and the interaction and interpretation of those experiences. (Alase, 2017). This research design is both exploratory and interpretive in that it allows the discovery of common themes and it allowed me to make sense of participants' experiences (Alase, 2017). Interpretive phenomenology holds a theoretical obligation to an individual's cognitive, linguistic, affective, and physical being (Sloan & Bowe, 2014), which is appropriate for the study purpose.

Participant selection was based upon GPA and state test scores. Data was collected by semi-structured interviews and observations and analyzed using the five steps for analyzing qualitative data proposed by Roberts (2010).

Initially, participants faced some issues with contextual understandings of interview questions, but after revisions and rephrasing, the interviewees were able to identify internal and external contributors to their academic success. Emerging from the study were six themes related to factors perceived to contribute to academic achievement.

The study's findings, which are positive friend/peer network, positive family support, positive teacher support, positive self-image, expectancy, and coping show these academically successful Black males were motivated through environmental, behavioral, and personal factors. The study's findings are an extension of existing literature. Family, teachers, schools, and personal efficacy strongly influence Black male achievement (Duriez et al., 2013; Kennedy-Lewis, 2013; Nelson, 2016).

Findings revealed that mothers supported participants externally and influenced them internally with attributes such as confidence and self-efficacy, all of which worked exclusively to drive participants to excel. Further, external factors such as teacher practices, school climate, and treatment by school personnel influenced academic achievement, but these influences were less effective than internal factors. Research participants identified the significance of strong parent support, positive friend/peer network, supportive teachers, and strong self-identify. Promoting excellence is essential in middle school when social and educational demands increase (Chung et al., 1998) because of developmental changes and new school environments (Nelson, 2016). The former President of the United States, Barack Obama, called for a nation of mentors to actively engage and invest in helping Black and Brown males to grow into capable, responsible men (Obama, 2014). Núñez et al. (2013) reported mentoring intervention is an effective tool that can counteract academic disengagement and failure. Mentors are one piece of the comprehensive puzzle. In this study, mentors were not represented in the lives of participants to a large degree.

Aside from parents, few participants identified mentors outside of their homes. The concept of how a mentor interacts with others was explained extensively after several participants identified their parents as their mentors. Even with a detailed explanation, study participants were not able to identify persons who served in their lives as mentors.

Zee et al. (2013) revealed students' increased interaction with faculty is closely connected to student satisfaction with school experiences. When students enjoy school, they are more inclined to attend regularly, which will improve academic outcomes. On school campuses, teachers are of utmost significance to the stability of the organization. The findings of this study confirmed the significance of teacher support as related to effective teaching, positive interactions, and encouraging behaviors. Discipline is also a significant factor.

The SCT emphasizes the concept of triadic reciprocity. Triadic reciprocity suggests the ongoing connection among personal, behavioral, and environmental factors are key to success. The influences from each source determine humans' functions. Each of the three areas of triadic reciprocity involves the influence of other people. Relationships represent the most enduring context for cognitive development (Bandura, 1989). Data from this study provide support of SCT and suggest that environmental, personal, and behavioral factors operate individually and collectively for a triadic relationship that promotes a more comprehensive concept for what supports the academic achievement of middle-school Black males. According to SCT, the reciprocal connections of these structures increase practices such as self-efficacy, reflection, and self-regulation (Bandura, 1989).

Self-regulation is a major component of SCT that is evidenced by goal setting, self-monitoring, and confidence (Burney, 2008). When self-regulatory practices and exercises exist, some non-productive behaviors, such as lack of preparation, are minimized. Thus, exposure to a

more challenging curriculum is met with a scholastic attitude (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2011). In this study, study participants demonstrated self-regulation when they "talked" to themselves. As expressed in many interviews, students were confident about their ability to make good grades, to perform athletically, and to expect good outcomes. Some non-productive behaviors were revealed by some participants. They lacked study habits and although they were aware when performance was not acceptable by their parents, some of them did not dedicate additional time to prepare for exams. Many participants set future goals. There was an understanding of the connection between middle-school achievement and future achievement in college and in future jobs.

This study revealed when Black males are in the school setting, they want to feel a sense of fair treatment and belonging. Overall, participants expressed that teachers were supportive and assisted them as needed. Teachers' support included verbal encouragement, strategic lessons, and personal recognition. Educators can create this atmosphere with regularly scheduled celebrations for accomplishments. Black males thrive in educational environments with teachers who recognize their achievement (Nelson, 2016). By sharing the voices of these middle-school, Black males, this study highlights important contributors that collectively encourage academic achievement and success.

Conclusions

I arrived at several conclusions based on the data. The first conclusion the data support is that participants perceive the concept of school achievement as attainable. Participants' reiterated their belief in their ability to achieve and maintain academic excellence throughout their interviews and their grades reflect this ability; this belief is predicated on the high level of self-efficacy they possess (Uwah et al., 2008). The obvious sense of pride they displayed when they

spoke about their academic accomplishment indicates that they enjoy making good grades and will not accept anything less. Self-efficacy beliefs are at the core of SCT (Bandura, 1995). Self-efficacy is an individual's judgement of their capability to execute a series of actions to receive a designated outcome (Bandura, 1986). Additionally, participants' ability to self-regulate when confronted with a challenging curriculum, by psyching themselves up (self-talk), setting goals, and proclaiming themselves as A students all point to strategies they used to attain their academic success.

The second conclusion the data confirm is that family support has a positive impact on the academic achievement of Black male students (Strayhorn, 2010). Positive family support in the form of high academic expectations, family values, and future career expectations reveal the confidence participants' family, specifically their parents, had in participants' ability to succeed academically (Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Kaplan & Maehr, 1999). These expectations kept participants accountable. Family support also took the form of paying for school fees and supplies as well as even helping with assignments. Children need their parents for basic needs, but their parents' deposits into their education are most critical to their overall status. Parents serve in offering incentives when deserved and boundaries of consequences when goals are lacking. The next closest supporter recognized by participants was siblings and family members. However, sibling and parent support were defined with little supportive evidence. Community and institutional support ranked lowest as factors that support academic achievement, with only 58% of participants reporting their significance.

The third conclusion consistent with the data is the instrumental role mothers play in advancing their children's academic success (Dornbusch et al., 1987). The data from the 12 participants revealed that mothers had varying levels of responsiveness to their children's

schoolwork or academics. Study participants with mothers who showed active interest in their academics were to be more directionally focused and vocal than those whose mothers did not. Mothers who expressed intellectual expectations for their sons encouraged their boys to persevere in school as these mothers clearly believe in the benefits of having a good education (Suizzo et al., 2014). This study found that the participants' mothers engaged in positive parenting practices such as being participants' role models, mentors, and, primarily, verbal supporters. Participants' mothers used the intimate knowledge that they have had of their children to find winning combinations of rewards and punishments to foster their children's focus on academic goals.

The fourth conclusion consistent with the data is that a positive friend/peer network is vital to academic attainment and success (Merolla, 2017). Positive friend/peer network took the form of encouraging academic support, competitiveness, motivation in pursuing academic goals, a willingness to collaborate on difficult assignments, etc., all of which contributed to participants' academic success (Song et al., 2015; Wentzel & Asher, 1995). Duriez et al. (2013) found that student interaction with peers and the social support offered by peers reinforce elevated motivations and goal setting.

The fifth conclusion that the study support is that academic success is predicated on positive teacher influence (Archambault et al., 2012). Participants perceive that teachers could influence their academic attainment both positively and negatively. Participants lauded teachers as influential toward their academic achievement when they invested time in pacing strategically taught lessons with explicit steps, offered advice for improvement and congratulations for the week's accomplishments, and had high academic expectations for participants. Conversely, participants perceived teachers as detrimental to their academic achievement when teachers

harbored a deficit-based view of Black students and punished Black students for the same actions that White students were spared punishment.

The sixth conclusion consistent with the data is Bandura's (1986) SCT postulation that learning and behavior are predicated on environmental, behavioral, and personal factors that interrelate a process of triadic reciprocal determinism (Burney, 2008). The analysis of findings confirmed the relationship between Black males' perceptions of achievement contributors and some aspects of the theoretical framework. These aspects included contributions from environmental, behavioral, and personal factors. These factors formed a triadic reciprocal influence on participants' academic achievement. Environmentally, the findings showed how students' academic success is informed by their parents, peers, and teachers. Specifically, the findings showed a strong connection between mothers and participants' academic achievement but not a very strong connection between fathers and participants' academic achievement. A critical analysis showed the strong role mothers played in the development of their sons. The assumption is that the fathers are more prevalent in leading when they are in the household; however, this assumption was not the case in this study. Six of 12 students lived with their fathers and one lived with a grandfather. In many cases, fathers were mentioned after participants were asked to respond to probing questions. Mothers were the key motivators and leaders in their child's educational values and always mentioned first. The data also showed a connection between teachers' perceptions of participants' academic capabilities and participants' academic attainment. Behaviorally, there was little relationship between participants' self-regulation and role models. Although their behavior was less shaped by the beliefs of their peers, cognitive collaboration improved more with academic tasks resulting in improved relationships. Also, peers improved their focus on academics when other peers were engaged with them. Personally,

the data showed a positive relationship between participants' self-confidence and self-efficacy. Participants reported that they have positive self-image that would not let them accept anything less than academic excellence. Thus, they used self-regulation to bolster their self-efficacy when faced with challenging academic tasks. Participants had a built-in sense of urgency to perform in school that was not connected to pleasing the parent or others. Personal experiences such as emotions were in continuity with an attitude of perseverance regarding new and challenging content.

Interpretation of Findings

The purpose of this qualitative interpretive phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of select, Black male students who have been academically successful in a high-poverty rural middle school in the Southern United States. To achieve this purpose, three research questions were used to holistically explore the environmental, behavioral, and personal factors that academically successful Black male students perceived as supportive of their academic achievement. This section includes a discussion of the findings in relation to these research questions and extant literature. Research questions were based on SCT and supported by the literature.

The first interpretation from the data and findings is that participants perceive the concept of school achievement as attainable. Participants believe in their ability to achieve and maintain academic excellence and their grades reflect this ability. This belief is predicated on the high level of self-efficacy they possess and their ability to self-regulate in the face of a challenging academic curriculum. This interpretation relates to RQ3 because it sought to identify personal factors that these Black male students in a high-poverty rural middle school perceived as supportive to their academic achievement. This finding aligns with the literature which identified

self-efficacy as foundational to human motivations, well-being, and accomplishments (Bandura, 1989; Sarac & Tutak, 2017). Self-efficacy involves one's level of perseverance in adversity and vulnerability to stress. Self-efficacy is critical to self-regulation (Bandura, 1986). Self-regulation is a major component of SCT that is evidenced by goal setting, self-monitoring, and confidence (Burney, 2008). When participants practiced self-regulatory practices and exercises, some non-productive behaviors, such as lack of preparation, were minimized. Thus, exposure to a more challenging curriculum is met with a scholastic attitude (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2011).

The second interpretation is that family support has a positive impact on the academic achievement of Black male students (Strayhorn, 2010). This interpretation relates to RQ2 (What factors in the educational environment do Black male students in a high-poverty middle school identify as supportive to academic achievement?). Participants identify supportive family practices such as paying for school fees and supplies, helping with assignments, high academic expectations, upholding family values, and articulating future career expectations that reveal the confidence participants' parents had in their ability to succeed academically. This interpretation is consistent with findings from the literature that parents can advance their children toward greater academic success (Hayes, 2012; Jensen & Minke, 2017). As their children's first teachers, parents provide support that is foundational to the stability of the educational attainment and future of these young men (Warren et al., 2018). Per Leithwood and Patrician (2015), parental engagement can influence the disparities in family backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses. Parents' expectations for children's academic performance, type of parenting style, and level of parental engagement in their children's schoolwork and other endeavors can provide intellectual and social capital that is key to their children's academic performance (Fuentes et al., 2019; Garcia & Serra, 2019; Leithwood & Patrician, 2015; León-del-Barco et al., 2020).

The third interpretation is the instrumental role mothers play in advancing their children's academic success. This interpretation also relates to RQ1 (What factors in the educational environment do Black male students in a high-poverty rural middle school identify as supportive to academic achievement?). This study finds that the participants' mothers engage in positive parenting practices such as being participants' role models, mentors, and verbal supporters. This level of maternal responsiveness can produce a positive connection between motivation, cognitive development, achievement, and school success (Bandura, 1986; Suizzo et al., 2014). This interpretation also confirms that of Suizzo et al. (2014) that African American mothers strongly identify with the determination with intervention model that outlines high academic expectations for their children to surpass them educationally and attain graduate degrees.

The fourth interpretation is that a positive friend/peer network is vital to academic attainment and success. This finding relates to RQ2 (What behaviors do Black male students in a high-poverty rural middle school perceive as supportive to their academic achievement?) and RQ3 (What personal factors do Black male students in a high-poverty rural middle school perceive as supportive to their academic achievement?). Participants identify positive friend/peer network as encouraging academic support, competitiveness, motivation in pursuing academic goals, and a willingness to collaborate on difficult assignments as contributing to participants' academic success (Song et al., 2015; Wentzel & Asher, 1995). Duriez et al. (2013) found that student interaction with peers and the social support offered by peers reinforced elevated motivations and goal setting. These positive friend/peer networks also foster students' learning interests and learning strategies (Ariani, 2017), trigger intellectual curiosity, increase learning efforts, reduce test anxieties, and improve academic achievement in general (Cirik, 2015).

The fifth interpretation is that academic success is predicated by positive teacher influence. This finding relates to RQ1 (What factors in the educational environment do Black male students in a high-poverty rural middle school identify as supportive to academic achievement?). Positive teacher influence consists of practices such as investing time to help students get through difficult materials, helping students improve their performance in an assignment, congratulating students on their achievements, and having high academic expectations for students (Ross & Bruce, 2007). Negative teacher influences include having deficit-based view of students, treating students unfairly, or having low academic expectations for students. According to the literature, factors such as teachers' attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs about the academic potential of Black male students often impact students' academic success positively or negatively (Archambault et al., 2012). Gest and Rodkin (2011) assert that teachers' perceptions of students shape the classroom social environment, which in turn directly contributes to important academic and social outcomes. Teachers' positive attitudes are transferred to students and eventually impact students' motivation, encourage engagement, increase self-worth, and increase sense of school belonging (Miller et al., 2017; Shahzad & Naureen, 2017).

The sixth interpretation is that learning and behavior are predicated on environmental, behavioral, and personal factors that interrelate in a process of triadic reciprocal determinism, which supports Bandura's (1986) SCT postulation. This interpretation aligns with all three research questions for the study and achieve the overall purpose of the study. The SCT "favors a model of causation involving triadic reciprocal determinism" (Bandura, 1989, p. 2). Behavior, personal, and environmental factors interact and influence each other. An example that supports the theory is the theme of family support. As the theory suggests, some influences are stronger

than others (Bandura, 1989). Because parent support is evident in environmental, personal, and behavior aspects, it appears throughout the interview responses but is less evident as a personal factor. The major links of parent support to achievement are noted in environmental and behavioral experiences (Day & Dotterer, 2018). Personal influences are the second strong influence on participants' behavior because of their high self-efficacy beliefs and ability to self-regulate when necessary to attain or maintain academic success (Hayes, 2012; Jensen & Minke, 2017). Behavioral influences are the least strong of all the factors.

Implications

Implications for Scholarly Literature

The findings generated from this research study have implications for literature, policy, and practice. First, this study adds to the limited scholarly literature on Black male students who have excelled academically in spite of the socioeconomic obstacles they face. Extant research focuses only on the deficits of the percentage of Black males who fail academically (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Mitchell & Stewart, 2013), indicating that Black male students are at the bottom of the achievement ladder in reading and math when compared to Black females, White females, and White males (Atwell et al., 2019; McFarland et al., 2016; Pitre, 2014). There is a wealth of research about mentoring, peer influence, and parent involvement, but there are few studies about middle school, Black males (Kahlenberg, 2013; Morrissey et al., 2014). This study provides another perspective to the academic achievement of Black male students that is not deficit-based. Also, this study provides an opportunity to hear first-hand the struggles and successes of a select sample of Black male, middle school students in a rural middle school in the Southern United States who are academically successful.

Second, this study explored the lived experiences of Black male students on academic achievement and the environmental, behavioral, and personal factors that are influential to their attainment of academic achievement. External and internal factors contribute to Black students' academic achievement (McGee & Pearman, 2015). Internal factors have lasting impacts on academic performance. These factors include self-perception, expectations, motivation, ambition, anxiety, attitude, self-confidence, and attitude toward school (McGee & Pearman, 2015). External factors can make it difficult for students to achieve success. These external factors include low socioeconomic backgrounds and reduced opportunities (Neal & Rick, 2014). Although extant research correctly identifies possible external and internal environmental, behavioral, and personal factors that impact the academic achievement of Black males, they do not account for the perceptions of these students regarding these factors. This study's findings mean that despite the fact that Black male students face all these internal and external factors, they have been able to succeed academically. The participants identified elements (i.e., positive family support, positive friend/peer support, positive teacher influence, and positive self-image) within these internal and external factors that influenced them positively in their academic attainment, therefore, providing a counter narrative to the negative consequences associated with these factors. These findings also confirm Bandura's (1986) SCT postulation that learning and behavior are predicated on environmental, behavioral, and personal factors that interrelate in a process of triadic reciprocal determinism.

Third, this study disconfirms some findings from the literature about the role of mentors in academic achievement. Per the literature, quality mentoring relationships provide critical advice and counsel to help students gain confidence, build self-awareness, and maintain resilience in and out of the school setting (Dowden et al., 2014; Walters, 2016). Improved

grades, daily attendance, and self-esteem are a few positive benefits from working with a mentor (Wyatt, 2009). This study's findings do not align with those of the literature on mentors or mentorship. Few participants in the study acknowledge having mentors outside of school. Those who identified a mentor identified a family member, including grandparent, sibling, and in one case a childhood coach. Most students struggled to respond to the question on mentors and pondered on a choice to share with me. Students seemed compelled to give a response, but they failed to identify mentor-type activities in which they participated with mentors. The lack of responses to that question led me to believe that few mentors existed in the lives of students and if the mentors did exist, they had infrequent input and contributions.

Implications for Policy

First, this study contributes to policy in providing feedback on existing educational policy. Findings from this interpretive phenomenological study provide relevant feedback to policymakers and school personnel about factors and educational practices within the school environment that participants find supportive and non-supportive to their academic achievement. Some of these factors and educational practices may be a result of existing educational policies. With this knowledge, policymakers can adjust educational policies to incorporate more of these supportive factors and phase out factors that are not supportive to academic achievement.

Second, this study contributes to literature by filling in the gap in research that documents students' educational experiences in middle school. Research has shown that education reformers have focused on early childhood and high school graduation but have neglected the middle school years (Yaffe, 2012). Middle school represents a period in students' lives when they experience more difficult academic content because they shift from learning how to read to learning from reading (Hernandez, 2011; Miller, 2015). Students' ability to make this transition

smoothly and successfully will determine whether they will pursue their education to the highest level or drop out in high school.

Third, this study contributes to policy by providing insight on the impact of positive friend/peer networks on their academics. Participants revealed the importance of a positive friend/peer network to helping them attain their academic achievement. Based on this finding, study participants may eventually serve as mentors since they are able to clearly identify contributors to their academic success. Policies that support the creation and/or expansion of schools' mentoring programs would offer support and counsel for peer-related issues that affect academic outcomes (Dowden et al., 2014). In cases in which students lack peer support, peer mentoring, and sports programs, policy makers can provide support to help the school community to build capacity with students whose academic achievement is threatened by the absence of these critical services. Both of these policy changes have the potential to improve peer dynamics.

Implications for Practice

First, this research study improves practice by revealing to teachers positive and negative attitudes within the classroom that affect the academic achievement of Black males. Participants identified attitudes such as believing in the students' academic abilities, congratulating students on their achievements, and having high academic expectations for students. Negative teacher influence includes having deficit-based views of students, treating students unfairly, or having low academic expectations for students. The literature showed that teachers' and other educational practitioners' behaviors can contribute, whether intentionally or unintentionally, to their students' sense of self-efficacy (Archambault et al., 2012). Gest and Rodkin (2011) asserted that teachers' perceptions of students shape the classroom social environment, which in turn

directly contribute to important academic and social outcomes. Teachers' positive attitudes are transferred to students and eventually impact students' motivation, encourage engagement, increase self-worth, and increase sense of school belonging (Ross & Bruce, 2007). Knowledge of which behaviors Black male students consider supportive to their academic achievement will be of particular benefit to practitioners who are in daily, direct contact with these students.

Second, this study contributes to practice by providing teachers with knowledge about participants' preferred teaching strategies for learning difficult academic concepts. Several participants indicated preferences for certain teaching strategies implemented by certain teachers that helped them grasp difficult academic concepts. Some of these strategies include using music to remember difficult-to-remember concepts, working in groups, providing multiple chances to improve their grades, providing additional resources to further students' understanding of the materials, and explaining academic concepts in less complicated language, among others. Given the consistently low academic performance recorded for Black male students (Dixon-Román et al., 2013) as well as the existing unfavorable perceptions of Black male students (Archambault et al., 2012), educational practitioners would benefit from the knowledge of the factors (or in this case, strategies) that can contribute to Black males' education and middle school students' perceived self-efficacy in the classroom. By implementing instructional strategies that participants have identified as helpful to learning difficult academic materials, teachers and other educational practitioners would be able not only to mitigate classroom failure (Lucio et al., 2012) among lower achievers but also address students' achievement proactively, and thereby foster remedies in support of improved academic achievement (Bong et al., 2012).

Third, this study contributes to practice by providing a blueprint of teachers' positive and negative attitudes, as well as effective and ineffective teaching strategies that can be used for

professional development. Participants in this study have voiced out their experiences of different teaching methods and teacher attitudes and identified which ones support them academically. This knowledge that participants have shared can be used for professional development that will introduce new instructional ideas, improve ineffective teaching practices, eliminate poor self-efficacy beliefs, and yield positive teacher outcomes (Miller et al., 2017; Shahzad & Naureen, 2017).

Implications for Unexpected Study Outcomes

Study participants achieved a high academic level without defined community and institutional support. Beyond parents, study participants stated mentors were practically nonexistent. However, the participants identified an affinity for role models who were mostly Black athletes. Participants admired these athletes for traits such as attaining a college degree, demonstrating discipline and hard work toward their sports, and having the determination to attain goals they have set. Per the literature, role models can help fight against delinquency and deviant behaviors (Vanassche et al., 2014; Walters, 2016). A positive emotional connection with same sex role models has shown to help teach characteristics of self-control through observing, actualizing, and replicating actions of role models (Walters, 2016). Azmi et al. (2014) found adolescents identified film stars (34.8%), teachers (27.9%), parents (14.3%), and sportsman (12%) as their role models.

The study revealed some unexpected responses to interview questions. The first unexpected response included a statement made by one young man about how genetics does not have to prevent Black males from achieving in the classroom. Another response that evoked critical thought was a question inquiring if achievement is reachable if family and community

supports are not offered or available to the student. These findings point to the possibility that some students struggle with deficit mindset that is preventing them from achieving academically. When participants made these comments, they displayed an empathetic tone of concern and considered the disadvantages a child experiences without adequate support. One participant had the following to say:

If you are having trouble with the teacher, don't disobey them. Ask them if you are having trouble with work, take a deep breath and work on what you need. If your conduct is bad, you should try monitoring yourself. Look at what you are doing and see if that is really what you want to be...Put a mirror in front of you.

Another participant said the following:

You can be more than average; you can be different in a good way. Like, when you are not being average, that means you are different. Sometimes it's good to be different in your own way. If your friend makes bad grades, you don't have to make bad grades to impress them.

A third participant gave the following advice:

If school ain't first to you, you should put school first...but if you not learning at the same rate as the rest of your classmates, you should let the teacher know and try to get help from the teacher.

A fourth participant responded to the possibility that Black males could not perform academically:

Don't let anybody see you not performing at our high level or let them think because you're a Black male you can't do it. If I can do it you can do it. Stay confident. Be motivated. And continue to study.

A fifth participant responded to the inquiry about genes hindering academic achievement, "But you don't know their genes." This middle school Black male said he would still suggest for low performing Black males to study, but genes can determine whether they can improve. His final comment was, "They may have parents who don't care." This response relates back to environmental and behavioral experiences that support students. In order to make these judgments, these students must have believed that parental support was needed in order for children to be successful in school. Furthermore, a huge part of these students' academic success came from their high confidence and self-efficacy that enabled them to persevere in their academics, even when they are learning challenging content. This attribute necessitates the need to establish a confidence-building school program for all students (Sarac & Tutak, 2017). This program will help students who do not possess confidence, who may be operating from a deficit mindset, or who may have deficit support overcome these obstacles and improve academically.

Suggestions for Future Research

The following recommendations are based upon the findings of the study.

Recommendations offer insight on continuing the achievement of Black males and improving the achievement of low achieving Black males. Recommendations for future research are detailed below:

This study was limited to one middle school in the Southern United States. The sample size consisted of 12 African American, achieving, male, middle school students. A broader sample across different middle schools is a recommendation for future research. This research study focused on middle school Black males' perceptions of supports of their academic achievement. A comparative analysis between achieving Black males and lower achieving Black males' perceptions is a recommendation for future research. Students are achieving academically

because of the reciprocal interplay of behavioral, personal, and environmental factors. Ideas of self-confidence and self-efficacy were found in all participants.

This research study focused on achieving middle school Black males who identified the contributors to their success. Research identifying contributors to the lack of achievement within low achieving Black males is a recommendation for future research. Achieving, middle school, Black males have advice for low achieving middle school Black males. A research study with achieving Black males as mentors to low achieving Black males is a recommendation for future research.

An unexpected outcome from the study was that students participate in study groups on group chat outside of school on their iPhones. Participants' used technology to encourage improved study habits, collaborate on assignments, and offer personalized peer assistance on academic concepts outside of the school environment. The use suggests that technology was not regarded as a tool for entertainment. This use of technology can offer an alternative approach to student learning and development outside the classroom that needs to be explored. Collaboration techniques through technology can help students learn collectively until students can eventually gain independence and work individually. Future research projects can explore students' use of technology, like their iPhones as a tool for student learning and development outside the classroom.

Limitations and Reflexivity

There are few limitations that may affect findings. The first limitation of the study was the selection criteria. A B average was used to identify possible candidates for participation. Participants ranged in grade levels and had different teachers, which suggested a difference in grading practices. This limitation limited maximum variability sampling (Creswell, 2009).

The second limitation was the methodology chosen for research. Qualitative research designs capture lived experiences of the participants rather than quantify data found in quantitative research studies (Creswell, 2009). Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research findings are not generalizable and may not be representative of the entire study demographic. Therefore, the findings of the study should not be generalized to all achieving middle school Black males.

The third limitation was there is no comparative data on middle school Black males who are high achievers. So, the research is not able to verify the findings objectively or statistically against other scenarios similar to the participants. Comparisons can lead toward duplication, but for the most part, duplication is not a part of the qualitative research process. Statistical representation is a part of quantitative data (Creswell, 2009).

As a school leader, I understand the need of focusing on specific topics for professional development in schools. In order for educators to gain understanding of the significance of factors that contribute to middle school, educators need to understand Black males' academic achievement. My experience with elementary, middle, and high school students extends 24 years; therefore, I have encountered Black males in several capacities. Because I am a mother of three Black males, I thought I understood the experiences of Black males. However, this study revealed aspects of the narrative concerning the experiences of Black males in the educational environment of which I was unaware; hence, I understand to a larger extent the need to plan targeted professional development for the educational staff to better support these students.

This study was my first attempt at a research project of such magnitude, apart from class assignments which were much smaller projects. I was a novice in many of the steps involved in writing the dissertation and relied on the advice and support of my committee members. For

example, increasing my participants from seven to 12, per the advice of my committee, enabled richer data than a seven-participant study would have yielded. I conducted this study as a full-time professional, and I struggled with juggling a full work schedule and collecting and analyzing data. As a result, I spent a longer time than I expected to conduct the study. This delay affected the currency of the sources in my literature review and warranted a renewed effort to update it. However, once I updated the literature review and began my analysis, I realized the importance of being able to confirm or disconfirm findings with the literature. Thus, I made countless consultations with the literature to ensure that I was correctly interpreting the findings that had emerged from a painstaking data analysis process.

Though this dissertation journey was full of many ups and downs, it was rewarding to know I brought to fruition something that started out as an idea. I hope that this experience will help me make better decisions in future research projects. And in future research projects, I will ensure that I do not attempt to combine a full work schedule with such a major undertaking.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I discussed an overview of the problem inclusive of recent research, the study's purpose statement and research questions that guided the study, followed by an overview of major findings from the literature review. Next, I explained the conceptual framework of SCT, overview of methodology, followed by a summary of major findings. After the major findings are conclusions and interpretations of the findings aligned to existing literature. Also, I discussed the implications of the study findings to literature, practice, and policy. Then, I made some suggestions for future research, identified the limitations in the study and reflected on the dissertation journey and the lessons I learned. I did identify factors that were perceived to contribute to high achievement. Some findings were consistent with the constructs of Bandura's

SCT-- environmental, personal, and behavioral factors. The findings and implications add to the limited existing body of research about middle school, Black male achievement.

Despite the abundance of studies showing the poor academic performance of Black students, especially Black males, there was a scarcity in the literature about the achievements of academically successful Black males. This interpretive phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of select, Black male students who have been academically successful in a high-poverty rural middle school in the Southern United States. Specifically, this study set out to identify middle school, Black males' perceptions of environmental, behavioral, and personal factors that were influential to their academic success. I used Bandura's (1986) SCT as the theoretical framework to inform the creation of the research questions that framed the study's inquiry. I interviewed and observed 12 participants purposefully selected for the study who have demonstrated high academic achievement among many other Black males who fail to perform comparably.

My analysis of the data revealed that participants found the following environmental, behavioral, and personal factors to be supportive to their academic achievement: positive family support, positive friend/peer network, positive teacher influence, positive self-image, expectancy, and coping. Positive family support is identified in the literature as a source of intellectual and social capital that is key to children's academic performance (Fuentes et al., 2019; Garcia & Serra, 2019; Leithwood & Patrician, 2015; León-del-Barco et al., 2020). Positive friend/peer network is identified in the literature to foster students' learning interests and learning strategies (Ariani, 2017), trigger intellectual curiosity, increase learning efforts, reduce test anxieties, and improve academic achievement in general (Cirik, 2015). Positive teacher influence is identified in the literature as having an impact on students' academic success positively or negatively

(Archambault et al., 2012). Teachers' perceptions of students shape the classroom social environment which in turn directly contribute to important academic and social outcomes (Gest & Rodkin, 2011). Positive self-image is identified in the literature as related to self-efficacy which enables the participants to pursue and achieve academic goals (Bandura, 1995). Expectancy is identified in literature as expecting positive or negative outcome as a result of engaging in a behavior (Bandura, 1986). Coping is identified in literature as a cognitive process of making adjustments through self-regulation (Bandura, 1986).

From these findings, I drew six conclusions. Conclusion 1 is that participants perceive the concept of school achievement as attainable. Conclusion 2 is that family support has a positive impact on the academic achievement of Black male students. Conclusion 3 is the mothers play an instrumental in advancing their children's academic success. Conclusion 4 is that a positive friend/peer network is vital to academic attainment and success. Conclusion 5 is that academic success is predicated on positive teacher influence. Conclusion 6 supports Bandura's (1986) SCT postulation that learning and behavior are predicated on environmental, behavioral, and personal factors that interrelate a process of triadic reciprocal determinism.

This study's findings and conclusions have implications for literature, practice, and policy. The study has the following implications for literature. First this study adds to the limited scholarly literature on Black male students who have excelled academically in spite of the socioeconomic obstacles they face, especially when extant research has only focused on the deficits of the percentage of Black males who fail academically (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Mitchell & Stewart, 2013). Second, this study identifies the perceptions of Black male students on academic achievement and the environmental, behavioral, and personal factors that are influential to their attainment of academic achievement, a perspective that is scarcely represented

in literature (Henfield et al., 2014; Warren et al., 2016). This study also confirms Bandura's (1986) SCT postulation that learning and behavior are predicated on environmental, behavioral, and personal factors that interrelate in a process of triadic reciprocal determinism. Third, this study disconfirms some findings from the literature about the role of mentors in academic achievement that quality mentoring relationships provide critical advice and counsel to help students gain confidence, build self-awareness, and maintain resilience in and out of the school setting (Dowden et al., 2014; Walters, 2016).

This study made the following implications for policy. First, this study provides feedback on existing educational policy by identifying aspects of the educational policies in school that participants find supportive to their academic achievement. Second, this study contributes to policy by providing insight into students' educational experiences in middle school, thereby addressing the gap in research that shows that education reformers have focused on early childhood and high school graduation but have neglected the middle school years (Yaffe, 2012). Third, this study contributed to policy by providing insight on the impact of positive friend/peer networks on their academic. This insight may help policy makers support the creation and/or expansion of schools' mentoring programs that would offer support and counsel for peer-related issues that affect academic outcomes (Dowden et al., 2014).

The study makes the following implications for practice. First, this study reveals to teachers the positive and negative attitudes within the classroom that affect the academic achievement of Black males, which confirms the literature that teachers' and other educational practitioners' behaviors can contribute intentionally or unintentionally to their students' sense of self-efficacy (Archambault et al., 2012), and that teachers' perceptions of students shape the classroom social environment (Gest & Rodkin, 2011). Second, this study contributes to practice

by providing teachers with knowledge about participants' preferred teaching strategies for learning difficult academic concepts. Third, this study contributes to practice by providing a blueprint of teacher positive and negative attitudes as well as effective and ineffective teaching strategies that can be used for professional development.

This study also makes some suggestions for future research that include the expansion of research to incorporate a broader sampling size across different middle schools. Another suggestion for research is a comparative study between achieving Black males and lower achieving Black males' perceptions of factors that influence their academic achievement. A final suggestion for future research is an exploration of students' use of technology, like their iPhones, as a tool for student learning and development outside the classroom.

I began the study with the intention of finding solutions to lessen the achievement gap and promote better school experiences for Black male students who have had less impressive school experiences. The findings from this study offer insight into how this goal might be achieved. I believe that if all educators and policymakers would consider and actively implement the study's findings in their practice and policymaking, there would be a drastic improvement in the academic performance of all students, not only Black males.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Site Permission



Conecuh County Board of Education

Corotta Boykin, Ed.D, President- District 4
Jan Hayes, Vice President- District 2
Willene J. Whatley- District 1
Janice Downing- District 3
Mary Bradley-Ray- District 5

February 20, 2017

As superintendent, I give consent to allow research by Tonya Bozeman to be conducted in this school district for the purpose of determining factors that contribute to the academic achievement of Black males in grades 6-8 at rural junior high schools in Conecuh County.

I understand that the participant names will not be identified in the study and that every precaution will be taken to ensure participation of those involved will remain confidential. There are no expectations of any risks or discomforts associated with this study. No personal benefits or compensation will be provided to participants. I understand that I or participants of the school district may withdraw from participation at any time.

Zickeyous M. Byrd
Signature of Superintendent
Zickeyous M. Byrd
Printed name of Superintendent
Conecuh County Schools
School District



Zickeyous M. Byrd, Ed.D
Superintendent

Willene J. Whatley- District 1
Janice Downing- District 3
Mary Bradley-Ray- District 5


April 4, 2019

As superintendent, I give consent to allow research by Tonya Bozeman to be conducted in this school district for the purpose of determining factors that contribute to the academic achievement of Black males in grades 6-8 at rural junior high schools in Conecuh County.

I understand that the participant names will not be identified in the study and that every precaution will be taken to ensure participation of those involved will remain confidential. There are no expectations of any risks or discomforts associated with this study. No personal benefits or compensation will be provided to participants. I understand that I or participants of the school district may withdraw from participation at any time.

Zickeyous M. Byrd
Signature of Superintendent
Zickeyous M. Byrd
Printed name of Superintendent
Conecuh County
School District

Appendix B: Human Subjects Research Training Certificate



Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that **Tonya Bozeman** successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course "Protecting Human Research Participants".

Date of completion: 02/26/2017.

Certification Number: 2335010.

Appendix C: University of West Florida IRB Approval



Research and Sponsored Programs
11000 University Parkway, Bldg. 11
Pensacola, FL 32514-5750

Ms. Tonya Bozeman

May 08, 2019

Dear Ms. Bozeman:

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Human Research Participants Protection has completed its review of your proposal number IRB 2019-182 titled, "A Phenomenological Study of Black Males in Selected High-Poverty Rural Junior High Schools," as it relates to the protection of human participants used in research, and granted approval for you to proceed with your study on 04-29-2019. As a research investigator, please be aware of the following:

- * You will immediately report to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated problems involving risks to human participants.
- * You acknowledge and accept your responsibility for protecting the rights and welfare of human research participants and for complying with all parts of 45 CFR Part 46, the UWF IRB Policy and Procedures, and the decisions of the IRB. You may view these documents on the Research and Sponsored Programs web page at <http://research.uwf.edu>. You acknowledge completion of the IRB ethical training requirements for researchers as attested in the IRB application.
- * You will ensure that legally effective informed consent is obtained and documented. If written consent is required, the consent form must be signed by the participant or the participant's legally authorized representative. A copy is to be given to the person signing the form and a copy kept for your file.
- * You will promptly report any proposed changes in previously approved human participant research activities to Research and Sponsored Programs. The proposed changes will not be initiated without IRB review and approval, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the participants.
- * **You are responsible for reporting progress of approved research to Research and Sponsored Programs at the end of the project period 04-29-2020. If the data phase of your project continues beyond the approved end date, you must receive an extension approval from the IRB.**
- * If using electronic communication for your study, you will first obtain approval from the authority listed on the following web page:
<https://uwf.edu/offices/institutional-communications/resources/broadcast-distribution-standards/>

Good luck in your research endeavors. If you have any questions or need assistance, please contact Research and Sponsored Programs at 850-857-6203 or irb@uwf.edu.

Sincerely,

Dr. Matthew Schwartz, Interim Assistant Vice President
Research Administration

Dr. Carla Thompson, Chair, IRB for
Human Research Participant Protection

Phone 850.474.2824 Fax 850.474.2802

Web research.uwf.edu
An Equal Opportunity/Equal Access/Affirmative Action Employer

Appendix D: Invitation Letter with Parental Consent and Informed Minor Assent Forms

Parental Consent Form

March 6, 2019

Dear Parent/Guardian of _____:

As a doctoral student at The University of West Florida, I am currently involved in the research of middle school Black males and the factors that contribute to their academic achievement. My research will take place at local junior high schools in Conecuh county. It is anticipated that the study's outcome will provide valuable insights for generating successful outcomes for Black males at junior high school rural school settings. I respectfully request your consent to include your child as a participant in this study.

Upon your receiving your permission, your child will be interviewed individually. Your child's Scantron scores, reading, and math grades will be utilized as part of the study. All information will be kept confidential. Interview times and locations will be prearranged. Please note that interview times will not interfere with your child's core instructional time.

Kindly note that not all information gathered will in no way affect your child's current or future academic or behavioral standing. Also note, the information gathered particular to your child, will not be shared with any other school or authority using your child's name. You or your child may withdraw from the study at any time. All information gathered is strictly confidential and there are no foreseen risks to your child's participation in this study.

If you would like your child to participate, please sign and return the section below. Your child must also sign the assent form in order to participate in the study.

Please feel free to contact me at (251) 525-2200 or tonwallace@yahoo.com if I can provide you with any questions specific to this study. You can also contact my doctoral chairperson Dr. Mark Malisa at 850-474-6042.

Sincerely,

Tonya Bozeman

I give my child _____, permission to be a participant in the study conducted by Tonya Bozeman. I am aware that my child's participation in the study will not affect his academic nor behavioral standing. I also understand that my child or I may withdraw my child from the study at any time and all information is strictly confidential.

Parent's Signature

Date

Middle School Black Males Perspective on Academic Achievement

Child Assent Form

Dear _____:

I am a doctoral student at The University of West Florida, and I am currently involved in the research of middle school junior high school Black males and the factors that contribute to their academic achievement. You are being asked to participate because you have a Proficient or Distinguished score on the Scantron and an 80 or above average in reading and math during the 2017-2018 school year.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview that will last from 45 minutes to 1 hour at your base school. Interview times will not interfere with your instructional school day.

Please note that all of the information you share will be kept confidential and will in no way affect your current or future academic or behavioral standing. Also note, the information I gather will not be shared with any other school or authority using your name. You can also withdraw from the study at any time. Finally, there are no foreseen risks to you as a participant in this study. Although you may not benefit directly from participating in this study, you may make a major contribution to information known about junior high Black males and school achievement.

If you would like to participate, please sign and return the section below to your school principal. Please feel free to contact me at (251) 525-2200 or tonwallace@yahoo.com if I can provide you with any questions about this study. You can also contact my doctoral chairperson Dr. Malisa at 850-474-6042.

Sincerely,

Tonya Bozeman

This research study has been explained to me and I agree to be in this study.

Subject's Signature for Assent

Date

Check which applies to be completed by person conducting assent discussion:

- The subject is capable of reading and understanding the assent form and has signed above as documentation of assent to take part in this study.
- The subject is not capable of reading the assent form however, the information was explained verbally to the subject who signed above to acknowledge the verbal explanation, and his/her assent to take part in this study.

Name of Person Obtaining Assent (Print)

Signature of Person Obtaining Assent

Date

Appendix E: Interview Protocol

Student Interview Protocol

School Name _____

Name of Person Interviewed _____

Age _____ Grade _____

Researcher: _____

Time Started: _____ Time Ended: _____ Total Time: _____

Introduction:

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me. I am currently working with the University of West Florida School of Professional Studies and I am studying academic achievement factors of high achieving Black males. The purpose of this interview is to learn more about how you achieve high levels of academic performance at your school. The information you share will be used to share knowledge about achieving high levels of student achievement.

The interview should take about 45 minutes. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Student Research Participant Interview Questions: Person-to-Person

Script prior to interview:

I would like to thank you again for being willing to participate in this interview aspect of my study. My study seeks to understand how Black males perceive academic achievement. The study hopes to gain insight to help other students. It seeks to understand how your environment, family, peers, the community, and society shape the way you feel about yourself as an achieving student. Our interview today will last approximately 45 minutes, which I will be asking about you and those you interact.

You completed a consent form that gave permission to audio record our conversation. Are you still ok with me recording our conversation today? ___ Yes ___ No

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Participant Bio

Name _____

Grade _____

Introductory Question

Tell me about yourself in terms of your current and past academic performance in school. How would you define achievement?

RQ1: What factors in the educational environment do Black male students in a high-poverty rural middle school identify as supportive to academic achievement?

Environmental Factors (any factor physically external to the individual that can affect one's behavior. The environment is comprised of social factors - family, friends, observational learning, and physical factors (weather, availability to products))

I would like to ask you some questions about your social network.

1. What support do you receive from your friends toward your education generally and academic work specifically?
2. What support do you receive from your parents toward your education generally, and toward your academic work specifically? (Paying of school fees, books, homework, etc.)
3. What support do you receive from your siblings and other family members toward your education generally and toward your academic work specifically?
4. What support do you receive from members of the community you live in toward your education generally and toward your academic work specifically?
5. What institutions do you have in your community that supports your education generally and your academic work specifically? (libraries, study groups, community center, clubs, etc.)

My next set of questions is focused on learning about your class experiences.

6. Sometimes students are treated differently in school. The treatment can be based upon several things. How does being a Black male influence how your teachers or principal view you or interact with you? (If the answer is "it does not" ask How did you come to understand that being a Black male does not matter in school?)
7. Describe your relationship with your teachers. Are they helpful? Supportive?
8. You have taken many courses since you have been in school. Have you found that you remember more from some teachers but do not learn as much from others? Can you give an example?
9. If you got a job as a teacher, what characteristics would you display with your students?
10. If you got a job as a school principal, what would you include in your school to help students excel?
11. Is there anything else about the classroom or school that influences you to engage in your classes?
12. Describe the mentors you have outside of school and how they invest in your life.

RQ2: What behaviors do Black male students in a high-poverty rural middle school perceive as supportive to their academic achievement?

Mastery/Behavioral Experiences (The manner, which individuals react to various inputs from their social and/or physical environment (self-regulation))

13. What motivates you to want to excel in your academic work?
14. What do you do to get confidence in your academic work?
15. Who are your role models? How do you model your academic achievements by following your role models?
16. What things have you done successfully in the past to give you confidence to want to persevere in your academic work?
17. What makes you connect to your friends?
18. What do you and your friends say when you talk about making good grades?

19. How do your peers encourage you to work harder in school to succeed or how do they discourage you not to work hard?
20. What do your parents say or think about your friends?
21. What about your school makes you feel you are in a safe learning environment?
22. Have you been a victim of bullying?
23. How does your school support you in reaching your goals? How could they better support you?
24. How often do you study?
25. How do you set achievement goals for yourself? Why do you believe you can achieve your goals?
26. What is your parents' response when you do not do well in school?
27. How do your parents reward you for school performance?
28. How do your teachers support you to reach your school/class goals?
29. What strategies do teachers use to help you persevere through challenging material?
30. What strategies do teachers use to help you build confidence, independence, and remain focused?
31. How do teachers respond to you when you are disengaged from teaching or exhibit behaviors that impede learning?

RQ3: What personal factors do Black male students in a high-poverty rural middle school perceive as supportive to their academic achievement?

Personal Experiences (Various mental processes such as behavioral capability, outcome expectancy, emotional coping responses, and feelings of self-efficacy. Beliefs, thoughts, or other cognitive factors within the individual that influences their behavior; affective and biological)

Thank you for your responses so far. I would like to continue with questions about your decision to do well in school.

32. How do you feel when you receive good/bad grades?
33. What is the source of confidence in our academic work? How did you gain this confidence?
34. How do rewards from others or yourself motivate you to continue to do well in school?
35. How do you modify your study habits when you do not perform at a high level?
36. What strategies do you use to acquire and understand new content that is taught in school?
37. Self-efficacy is the belief in yourself and your ability to succeed. It is similar to confidence. How do your feelings of self-efficacy prevent you accepting grades lower than a B?
38. How do you handle academic challenges you face at your school?
39. How do you decide which behaviors you observe from teachers are behaviors you should mimic?
40. What are your views about education with regards to its prospects of providing better opportunities for your future?

Closing Question

What advice would you give a middle school Black male who is not performing at a high level in school?

Appendix F: Observation Protocol



Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool (ELEOT)

The purpose of this tool is to help you identify and document observable evidence of classroom environments that are conducive to student learning. Results of your observations will be used to corroborate information obtained from interviews, artifacts and student performance data. Please circle the number that corresponds with your observation of each learning environment item descriptor below. As needed and appropriate, briefly make inquiries with students.

Date _____ School _____ City _____ State or Province _____ Country _____ Grade Level _____

Time In _____ Time Out _____ Check ALL that apply: Lesson Beg. _____ Lesson Middle _____ Lesson End _____ Subject Observed _____ Observer Name _____

Student-focused Observations	Very Evident	Evident	Somewhat Evident	Not Observed
A. Equitable Learning Environment:				
1. Has differentiated learning opportunities and activities that meet her/his needs	4	3	2	1
2. Has equal access to classroom discussions, activities, resources, technology, and support	4	3	2	1
3. Knows that rules and consequences are fair, clear, and consistently applied	4	3	2	1
4. Has ongoing opportunities to learn about their own and other's backgrounds/cultures/differences	4	3	2	1
B. High Expectations Environment:				
1. Knows and strives to meet the high expectations established by the teacher	4	3	2	1
2. Is tasked with activities and learning that are challenging but attainable	4	3	2	1
3. Is provided exemplars of high quality work	4	3	2	1
4. Is engaged in rigorous coursework, discussions, and/or tasks	4	3	2	1
5. Is asked and responds to questions that require higher order thinking (e.g., applying, evaluating, synthesizing)	4	3	2	1
C. Supportive Learning Environment:				
1. Demonstrates or expresses that learning experiences are positive	4	3	2	1
2. Demonstrates positive attitude about the classroom and learning	4	3	2	1
3. Takes risks in learning (without fear of negative feedback)	4	3	2	1
4. Is provided support and assistance to understand content and accomplish tasks	4	3	2	1
5. Is provided additional/alternative instruction and feedback at the appropriate level of challenge for her/his needs	4	3	2	1
D. Active Learning Environment:				
1. Has several opportunities to engage in discussions with teacher and other students	4	3	2	1
2. Makes connections from content to real-life experiences	4	3	2	1
3. Is actively engaged in the learning activities	4	3	2	1

	Very Evident	Evident	Somewhat Evident	Not Observed
E. Progress Monitoring and Feedback Environment:				
1. Is asked and/or quizzed about individual progress/learning	4	3	2	1
2. Responds to teacher feedback to improve understanding	4	3	2	1
3. Demonstrates or verbalizes understanding of the lesson/content	4	3	2	1
4. Understands how her/his work is assessed	4	3	2	1
5. Has opportunities to revise/improve work based on feedback	4	3	2	1
F. Well-Managed Learning Environment:				
1. Speaks and interacts respectfully with teacher(s) and peers	4	3	2	1
2. Follows classroom rules and works well with others	4	3	2	1
3. Transitions smoothly and efficiently to activities	4	3	2	1
4. Collaborates with other students during student-centered activities	4	3	2	1
5. Knows classroom routines, behavioral expectations and consequences	4	3	2	1
G. Digital Learning Environment				
1. Uses digital tools/technology to gather, evaluate, and/or use information for learning	4	3	2	1
2. Uses digital tools/technology to conduct research, solve problems, and/or create original works for learning	4	3	2	1
3. Uses digital tools/technology to communicate and work collaboratively for learning	4	3	2	1
NOTES:				

Appendix G: Informed Consent and Recorded Media Addendum

**Institutional Review Board
The University of West Florida**

Recorded Media Addendum to Informed Consent

For use with general informed consent documents for studies that involve audio, video, photographic, or any other recording (hereafter referred to as recording) of research subjects.

Project Title: A Phenomenological Study of middle school Black Males in Selected Rural Middle School

Date: March 6, 2019

Investigator: Tonya Bozeman

Email Address: tb43@students.uwf.edu

Phone 251-525-2200

Description and Purpose of Recording:

The researchers would also like to take audio recordings of you during your interview in order to illustrate the research in a dissertation.

Confidentiality:

Ethical Issues/Permissions

Research can be carried out when Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval has been attained from the researcher's home institution. Second, the researcher will obtain permission to gain access to participants' academic record through the school district's superintendent. The researcher will take these steps in observance of the principles of ethical research, which include respect for persons, concern for welfare, and justice (Creswell & Poth, 2017). These principles provide confidentiality and protection of persons unable to defend themselves.

Participants will be distributed a letter during their first period class that provides an overview of the study, including consent forms and assent forms (Appendix D), which enables participants to make informed decisions about their participation in the study. The letter and the forms will also assure anonymity and provide information about withdrawing from the study without penalty. Informed consent forms are required for participants less than 18 years of age. The study's purpose will be discussed with students who will be requested to take information home to parents to complete and return to school. Once the consent letter is signed and returned, they will be reviewed to determine who accepted the invitation. Seven students will be selected; the seven with the highest grade point average will be requested to participate.

To increase the security and fair treatment of all participants, the researcher will employ additional confidentiality protocols such as assigning aliases and pseudonyms to participants to protect their identity. Assigning aliases to participants are in accordance with ethical protocols,

as described by Merriam (2009) who emphasized the nondisclosure of personal information about any participant. In addition, participants will be aware they can withdraw from the study at any time.

Every effort will be made to protect all participants. Data will be secured to safeguard confidentiality by storing it in a locked cabinet in a secure location that is accessible only by the researcher. Data collection instruments will not contain information that will readily identify participants. Each participant will be assigned a study ID (a number letter combination) prior to collecting data and the list of IDs will be stored separately from data sources. Written interview data will be coded instead of using identifying information. Recorded interviews and other identifying information will be locked in a separate location of which access will be restricted to the researcher only. Identifiable data will be encrypted. Upon completion of study, data sources will be properly disposed of by shredding after a reasonable period of no more than 5 years (Creswell, 2014).

Anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained. The recordings will be stored to maintain confidentiality. The audio tapes will be transcribed by the researcher and erased once the transcriptions are checked for accuracy. Transcripts of your interview may be reproduced in whole or in part for use in presentations or written products that result from this study. Neither your name nor any other identifying information (such as your voice or picture) will be used in presentations or in written products resulting from the study

Voluntary Consent:

By signing below, you are granting to the researcher the right to use your recorded interview for publishing this research. No use of recorded media will be made other than for the reasons stated herein.

Your participation is voluntary and your refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

You may discontinue participation and withdraw this consent at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

If you have any questions, please contact:

Tonya Bozeman
251-525-2200

University of West Florida Institutional Review Board
11000 University Parkway, Building 11
Pensacola, FL 32514
(850) 857-6378
irb@uwf.edu

Subject's Printed Name & Signature	Date

Parent / Legally Authorized Representative's Printed Name & Signature	Date
Investigator's Printed Name & Signature	Date

Appendix H: Cogna External Research Approval



External Research Approval

The Research & Analytics department at Cognia has received the completed *External Research Request* and summary of research activities. This letter constitutes approval for use of Cognia tools and services solely for the purpose outlined in the original request.

Summary of request:

- Name of research project: A Phenomenological Study of Black Males in Selected High-Poverty Rural Junior High Schools.
- Name of researcher: Tonya Dukes Bozeman
- Requested tools and/or services: eProve Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool (eleot® 2.0)
- Date of approval: December 8, 2020

A condition of this approval is that final work product(s) (e.g., completed research report) are to be submitted to the Research & Analytics department upon completion.

We wish you the best of luck in your scholarly and professional activities. If you have any question or require assistance, please contact the Research & Analytics department at research_analytics@cognia.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Matthew Gushta".

Matthew Gushta, Ph.D.

Director, Research & Analytics

matthew.gushta@cognia.org