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Previous research has shown that Black males do not find schools to be safe spaces or places where they feel a sense of belonging. Instead, they do not feel welcomed (Brooms, 2019a). If students must spend 8 to 9 hours in a place daily, we will want that space to be somewhere they want to be. Findings from research conducted by Collins et al. (2022) confirm that students have a better chance of academic success when affirmed and welcomed.

My study aimed to discover where Black male students feel they most belong and why. Specifically, I aimed to answer my main research question: *What are Black male teenagers' experiences with and perceptions of their feelings of belonging in schools and recreation centers?* My secondary question was: *What recommendations do Black males have for improving their feelings of belonging?* For my research, I defined a sense of belonging as a feeling of connectedness with or integration into a community (Hussain & Jones, 2021). In my qualitative study, I interviewed several Black young men attending local high schools and recreation centers in the city of Campbell (a pseudonym). Using the Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) concept of counter-stories, I sought to gain insight into the lived experiences of my participants.

In my study, I found that the Black male students who were my participants had different definitions of belonging and what it felt like to them, but some common elements, such as mutual respect, were expressed. In addition, the participants experienced an increased sense of belonging in recreation centers compared to their high schools. They also explained that in recreation centers, they encountered fewer issues with traditional negative stereotypes that typically plague Black males. Finally, the participants recommended schools and recreation

centers increase their sense of belonging in those spaces. Their recommendations included that schools ensure fair discipline practices and that recreation centers offer more community events. Some of the key takeaways from my study are that feelings of belonging are relative to personal experience, school size is important, and support is always necessary. I conclude by offering advice for practitioners and future researchers.

BLACK MALE SENSE OF BELONGING:
EXPLORING STUDENT VOICES

by

Michael Steven Brown, Jr.

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Approved by

Dr. Craig Peck
Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation, written by Michael Steven Brown Jr., has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair

Dr. Craig Peck

Committee Members

Dr. Kisha Daniels

Dr. Brian Clarida

February 21, 2024
Date of Acceptance by Committee

February 21, 2024
Date of Final Oral Examination

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I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to the Black males who are struggling with the injustices that society has placed on them. I wish every young Black male finds a trusting adult who will steer them on a path that plants seeds that will grow into them to be pillars of their communities and stewards of goodwill to others.

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When mentoring teens, I tell them that every degree you get is like a championship ring in athletics. The same things you need to win a championship (hard work, determination, and perseverance) are the same attributes needed to acquire any educational diploma. I am thankful to say that I am receiving my last championship ring.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Black students comprise 17% of the student population in our schools but 32% of the discipline referrals (Young et al., 2018). Moreover, Black male students are more likely to be suspended or have other exclusionary discipline procedures (Gwathney, 2021; Young et al., 2018). Black males are also more likely to be referred for subjective infractions (e.g., disobedience, defiance of authority, and disrespect of authority; Lloyd, 2021; Young et al., 2018). These statistics support previous research, which has shown that Black males do not find schools to be safe spaces or places where they feel a sense of belonging. Instead, they do not feel welcomed or heard (Brooms, 2019a). We would not want any individual to feel this way in any space. If students must spend 8 to 9 hours in a place daily, we will want that space to be somewhere they want to be. Findings from research completed by Collins et al. (2022) confirm that students have a better chance of academic success when they feel affirmed and welcomed in said space.

In this study, I explored the phenomenon of Black teenage male belonging. I defined a sense of belonging as a feeling of connectedness with or integration into a community (Hussain & Jones, 2021). I interviewed teens in a city in North Carolina about where they feel they most belong and are welcomed. We discussed what made them comfortable in those spaces and what caused them discomfort. The information gathered from this study will help create policies and practices in recreation centers and schools that will make them more welcoming spaces for all students.

Statement of the Problem

Many researchers have completed studies on Black males' sense of belonging in schools. Scholars such as Dr. Brooms (2015, 2019a) and Dr. Grace (2020) have extensively researched

the Black male sense of belonging in K-12 schools, looking at various factors such as achievement, students' peer groups, and extracurricular activities to gauge belonging. Previous scholars have explicitly looked at Black males' belonging in math classes (Anderson, 2016) and in community colleges (Newman et al., 2015) as well as belonging as it relates to higher education (Brooms, 2019b; Strayhorn et al., 2015). In each of these studies, scholars found that Black males do not feel welcomed in schools. Schools are not places where they feel heard, appreciated, and wanted.

As a marginalized population with a history of encountering exclusionary tactics, Black males need a sense of belonging to experience success (Hussain & Jones, 2021). Black males have been under attack by the media and police in recent years (Carey, 2019). This means having spaces where Black males feel valued and heard is necessary. Many scholars have looked at various ways for Black males to feel included. The research found three key themes helpful among high-achieving Black males in higher education: institutional climate, support from peers and staff, and an overall sense of belonging (Strayhorn et al., 2015). Even though most of these factors are external to the individual, maturity plays a significant part in an individual feeling welcomed (Newman et al., 2015). Most study participants did not feel like they belonged in the school setting. They felt as if the school was a place that did not support Black males, stating that only basketball and football players belonged if they were a Black male (Grace, 2020). Another factor that students identified as hindering their sense of belonging was having trusted individuals in schools to relate to (Grace, 2020). We as educators need to develop places where Black males can feel secure and comfortable for their well-being.

The problem of belonging needs to be addressed to build spaces for this population to feel comfortable and welcomed for their success. Previous research has explored this topic in

specific locations, such as community colleges, charter schools, and predominantly white institutions. Little research has yet to explore different spaces to determine where and why Black males feel the most welcomed and the highest sense of belonging. This means less academic success for this population. Through this study, I have identified why recreation centers make Black males feel more comfortable and how to replicate those feelings in schools.

Purpose of the Study

Previous research shows that Black males do not feel like they belong in educational settings (Anderson, 2016; Grace, 2020; Strayhorn et al., 2015). Other research has shown that Black males also have issues with belonging in a community setting because of police discrimination (Brunson & Weitzer, 2009; Kelly Pryor & Outley, 2014). My study aimed to discover where Black male students feel they belong and why. I asked students why they thought they were the most comfortable in those areas. The goal of my study was to find out what makes these spaces welcoming and think through ways to try to recreate that feeling in other places.

In addition to gathering information that can be useful to practitioners through this research, another objective of my study was to add to the existing research about Black teen male belonging. I built upon previous research by examining recreation center and community components. I then compared those institutions to schools. To increase self-esteem and achievement, schools should create spaces where students can feel like they belong and have a voice (Grace, 2020). A sense of belonging means the teens feel welcomed and comfortable in a particular setting. A high sense of belonging is associated with higher self-worth (Anderson, 2016).

Another issue that Black male students face is discrimination in schools from adults. Increased instances of discrimination have lessened teens' feelings of belonging in schools

(Hussain & Jones, 2021). These instances can come because of being labeled as “at-risk” (Marsh & Noguera, 2018) or being identified as needing services from the exceptional children’s department, that is, being labeled with a disability (Grace, 2020). Attaching such labels to Black males can decrease their sense of belonging and increase issues related to mental health, such as depression, greater chances of PTSD, increased chances of substance abuse, and an overall lower self-rated general mental health (Vargas et al., 2020).

Research Questions

The main research question that drove my study was: *What are Black male teenagers’ experiences with and perceptions of their feelings of belonging in schools and recreation centers?* My secondary question was: *What recommendations do Black males have for improving their feelings of belonging?*

The purpose of the first research question was to understand the experiences and perceptions of Black male teenagers as they relate to their feelings of belonging. This helped me frame the study and provided the primary source of information regarding African American males’ sense of belonging in recreation centers and schools. The secondary question allowed me to gain insight into Black males’ ideas for improving their sense of belonging. I sought to paint a comprehensive picture of Black teenagers’ feelings of being welcomed and how to replicate that feeling elsewhere.

Background Context

In recent years, the plight of Black males has been widely publicized by the high-profile slayings of Black men such as George Floyd, Philando Castile, and Alton Sterling, to name a few. Since January 2015, there have been 1,301 Blacks (males and females) shot at the hands of police, which equates to 31 deaths per million, far more than any other racial group (McCarthy,

2020). Parents of Black boys are now having to give their sons the “police talk,” which is about how to behave when being stopped by the police so they will stay alive. This is the world in which we live, one where parents must fear if their Black sons will even survive a routine traffic stop. Movements and factions such as “Black Lives Matter” and “Proud Boys” have fueled an already racially divided country. These are what Black male teens see on TV and portrayed around them.

The prognosis for Black male teens is that they will fare no better in schools. Schools from all levels, from grade school to university, are having issues with disproportionality in the discipline (Young et al., 2018) and discrimination toward Black males (Houston et al., 2020; Hussain & Jones, 2021; Newman et al., 2015). It is hard for Black males to attain respite in the two places where they spend the most time.

Knowing these issues, where do Black males feel most welcomed and belong? How can we replicate the feeling of belonging they feel in this location within schools and community entities such as recreation centers? Being a Black male myself and living through some of the same issues that others who look like me have lived through, it is only suitable that I intended my research to help not only me but every other Black male who comes after me. Allow me to walk so they can run.

Methods

In my research study, I examined the lived experiences of Black male teenagers as they relate to a sense of belonging in schools and recreation centers. My qualitative study utilized elements of phenomenology to examine and understand the phenomena of belonging, which means feeling welcomed, heard, and appreciated.

Engaging participants through a phenomenological lens involves in-depth interviews that focus on the life history of the individuals involved (Roberts, 2010). Ballard and Cintron (2010) describe phenomenology as the everyday experiences of individuals relating to a specific phenomenon. Looking at subjects through a phenomenological lens means looking for phenomena that are not easily viewed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Unlike traditional phenomenological studies, this study did not look for the essence or core of mutually understood experiences. Instead, I sought to examine the general phenomenon of belonging by speaking with Black male teens about their experiences.

Research Settings and Participants

My interviews were conducted with eight teenagers who frequent recreation centers in a medium-sized metropolitan city called Campbell in the southeastern United States. For this study, I describe the term “frequent recreation centers” as facilities they use at least twice a month. The study focused on public, city-owned, and operated recreation centers, distinguishing them from privately owned facilities requiring a paid membership for amenities. No such paid membership is needed for teenagers to utilize city-owned facilities. All participants attended the local school district in the city of Campbell (a pseudonym). Geographically, it is the largest district closest to where they live and the recreation center area. The participants were 18 or 19 years old. The study also included current high school students and recent high school graduates. All participants were Black males with experience growing up in urban settings. I hope that gathering this information from my participants will assist concerned stakeholders in developing more spaces where Black males feel they belong.

I selected study participants based on their age and race. This is an example of purposeful sampling, as described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). More specifically, I sought to identify

study participants by approaching individuals with whom I have a relationship. That was the base of about six participants. To get to eight participants, I asked the initial participants if there were any other people they felt I should utilize for the study. Researchers refer to this method as snowball sampling. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) consider snowball sampling the most common form of purposeful sampling. This technique helps the researcher find other participants with similar experiences as the primary core group.

Data Collection Methods

My conversations with the teenage participants took place through Zoom, and each interview lasted around one hour. The participants engaged in one round of individual interviews. Four of the eight participants also collaborated in a 2-hour focus group, contributing to a total data collection time of approximately 10 hours. Appendix A shows the semi-structured protocol I used for the interviews, and Appendix B shows the semi-structured protocol I used for the focus group. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) describe a semi-structured interview as being positioned between highly structured/standardized and unstructured. This interview style is more open-ended, allowing the participants to give broader answers and the interviewer to ask unscripted follow-up questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In the interviews and the focus group, I gathered the information necessary to address the research questions outlined for the study.

As mentioned, I conducted the interviews and the focus group through Zoom. Since all participants had registered in recreational programming through Campbell Parks and Recreation, I obtained permission from Campbell Parks and Recreation to include their participants in the study. Interviews and a focus group were the best ways to collect information about the lived experiences of Black male teenagers because the participants could tell their own stories firsthand. This approach also allowed Black male teenagers to speak freely about their

experiences. Participants could elaborate on any information they would like to relate to the study in the individual interviews and the focus group. During the focus group, when one participant answered the question and the others did not speak, they were asked if they would like to share anything before moving on to the following questions.

Data Analysis Strategies

I used an online transcription service to transcribe the interviews and the focus group session. Once I had the transcriptions, I conducted open coding, which means the development of codes based on what you find in the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To develop these codes, I considered keywords relevant to my study, as reflected in my literature review and the interviews. Next, I applied codes to the transcripts; I then grouped the codes into categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). After analyzing the codes and categories, I identified five themes. I describe these themes, which represent my study's findings, in Chapter III.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness and ethical considerations in research aim to ensure your results are honest, reliable, helpful, respectful, and caring. To address ethical concerns, I used pseudonyms instead of the names of participants, institutions, and specific locations. I refrained from using participants' real names for the study to safeguard their identities. I had a prior relationship with most of the initial participants. With the participants referred to me through snowball sampling, I built a relationship with them through informal conversation before the start of the interview.

I also engaged in member checking, used in qualitative research to ensure accurate descriptions and interpretations of the data (Birt et al., 2006). After the interviews, the participants could review their transcripts to ensure accuracy and clarity. This was accomplished by emailing each participant the transcripts and asking them to let me know if they captured what

they were trying to convey. If I had not heard back from a participant, I sent a follow-up email and phone call before using their interview in the study. All participants indicated that the transcripts were correct and conveyed their message correctly. After analyzing the transcripts, I shared the study's main themes with participants so they could gain their impressions and feedback.

Finally, I kept a reflexivity journal to reflect on assumptions and biases throughout the process. This tool helped me address my position and self-awareness as a researcher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Completing a study with Black male participants, I may have had similar experiences that they may share throughout our interviews. I used the reflexivity journal to log my perceptions, procedures, methodological decision points, and personal introspections for the research results.

Limitations

A primary limitation I encountered was having a relatively small sample size of eight teenagers. Even though there are no set requirements for sample size within qualitative research (Busetto et al., 2020), it is hard to generalize the lived experiences of all Black males using eight participants. Also, since my research focuses on only students in one geographic area, that fact is a limitation. Due to the main limitations of a small sample size and a small geographic area, one cannot apply the study's findings and replicate some of the themes from the interviews in other similarly populated areas around the country. In short, this study is not generalizable.

Working with individuals' memory, one can always question the validity of the data. Individuals may misremember events that occurred or portray the events differently than how they happened or how others remember them happening. Interviewer presence can also serve as a limitation. Suppose the participant needs more of a rapport with the interviewer. In that case,

this can create an environment where the participant needs to speak more freely or provide helpful information for the study. To lessen the effects of this limitation, I built a relationship with the participants through informal conversations to let them know they could speak freely about their experiences. Having prior relationships with participants is considered acquaintance interviewing. Roiha and Iikkanen (2022) found that prior relationships are central to interview comfort and research.

Theoretical Framework

This qualitative study investigated how students' experiences in specific institutional spaces shape their sense of belonging. I used critical race theory (CRT) as my theoretical framework. The five basic tenets of CRT, according to Delgado and Stefancic (2017), are (a) color blindness, (b) interest convergence or material determinism, (c) social construction or differential racialization, (d) intersectionality and, lastly, (e) unique voice of color or counter stories. CRT investigates the relationship between race, racism, and power. First, colorblindness is the notion that one does not see color when dealing with an individual or creating a policy. They only see people. Critical race theorists contend that lawmakers not addressing marginalized people's lived experiences hinders their progress in life (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

According to Lewis and Shah (2021), the second tenet of CRT, interest convergence, is the idea that Blacks advance toward racial equity only when doing so converges with white people's interests, needs, expectations, and ideologies. In essence, if individuals with power choose not to extend that power to others or utilize it to uplift others, the others (in this case, Black male teenagers) will not experience any benefits from the implemented changes. Third, social construction means that our system, our social structure, is not able to lessen the injustices that history has placed on Black and Brown people (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Fourth,

intersectionality examines race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation regarding how these parts of a person connect (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The fifth tenet, counter-storytelling, was the most essential part of my study. Counter-storytelling aims to change the perceived narrative or stereotypes for a particular population of people held by the majority (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Each of these key ideas works in tandem and individually to form the tenets of CRT.

More specifically, this study focused on the tenet of counter-storytelling. Counter-storytelling allows Black males to share their own stories and narratives to counteract popular stereotypes placed on them. Popular stereotypes of racialized groups have changed over time (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Black males have been historically viewed as dangerous criminals (Brunson & Weitzer, 2009). This stigma has stuck with them and has only worsened in recent years. Due to this stereotype, Black males have had increased attention from the police (Brunson & Weitzer, 2019) and have higher exclusionary discipline than their white counterparts (Young et al., 2018). Knowing this fact explains why Black males would have less of a sense of belonging in specific spaces.

The CRT tenet of counter-storytelling was important in how I designed and analyzed my study. Through interviews, I afforded the participants, who were all Black male teenagers, the ability to tell their own stories to counteract popular stereotypes that plague Black males. I asked the participants questions that evoked more storytelling in their responses. I designed the interview questions to help encourage the participants to tell stories about their experiences in schools and recreation centers.

Using CRT as an analytical lens, I sought to understand the relationship among race, racism, and power as it related to the Black male teens and their sense of belonging in schools

and the community as a whole. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) describe racism as “ordinary” (p. 7). With this being such an ordinary factor of life to deal with, one would know why it is vital to create counter-stories to the stigmas that are plaguing Black teenagers. My study highlighted student voices so they could tell their story. So often, we hear just one side of an issue. Stereotypes and other negative energy overpower the voice of Black youth (Smith & Hope, 2020), yet my reliance on counter-storytelling allowed me to gain insight into how Black male teens express their perspectives on their experiences. They often presented a different description of events to what authority figures might say, challenging the dominant information being shared.

Delgado and Stefancic (2017) define counter-storytelling as an alternative to the perceived narrative, recognizing that stories can be destructive. Narratives such as patterns of low achievement and graduation rates and limited access to highly qualified teachers as well as an increased presence in the school-to-prison pipeline create a negative narrative around Black male teens (Miller et al., 2020). To counter the stigmas and pave the way for a new pathway in the future, I used CRT to address the issue of belonging in key spaces for Black male youth.

Researcher Experience

Belonging in Society? What does that mean, and does anyone really “fit” or “belong” to society? At 14 and 15, I would probably say “yes” if someone asked me if I felt like I “fit” in society. I was mainly around and frequented places that were predominately people who looked like me. When I started driving at the age of 16, my perspective changed. I was a junior at Hillside High School (in 2002), driving a 1999 Dodge Durango that my mother bought me. All my friends would also ride with me since I was the only one in my friend group with a car, and I had three rows of seats so that everyone could get in my vehicle. Having this many Black

teenage males in one vehicle also received much attention from the police. I even got more attention from the police when I drove my mother's car because she had a luxury vehicle.

One night, I remember three of my best friends and I were leaving Southpoint Mall when the police stopped us, searched the vehicle (taking apart a clear vacuum cleaner), frisked us, and handcuffed each of us on the side of the highway. They stated there was a report of weapons in the car when, in all actuality, they saw four young Black males in a luxury vehicle. These experiences in high school were the first time I realized where I stood in the greater society.

As an adult, I had the opportunity to serve as a juror on a trial in Alamance County. It was a case about a white couple where the husband allegedly stabbed his wife. At the time of the incident, the couple told police that a Black man wearing a hoodie stabbed her and ran off into the woods. The police did not take any fingerprints or analyze the scene inside the home because of the accusation that a Black man did it. Later, the couple divorced, and the wife moved with the family to Virginia. While in Virginia, she told police that it was her husband who stabbed her while he was under the influence. Out of 12 jurors, I was the only one with a guilty verdict. The others shared my concern about saying a Black man did it, but because of the lack of evidence taken by police at the crime scene, they could not convict the husband because of reasonable doubt. This incident had me wondering if a white man could get off so quickly, then why were so many people of color convicted in the same justice system that just let him go free? Where do Black males really "fit" in society? Where can they say they belong?

My sense of belonging in school followed a very different path. Growing up, I attended predominantly Black schools. Having a parent who worked in a neighboring district, there were never any issues with feeling a sense of belonging in school. Also, having an aunt teach at my high school helped my overall sense of belonging. There was never a time when I did not feel

like a part of the school community. This perspective differs for many of our Black teenagers attending high school today. They do not have the same support system as a parent working in a school or a family member working in their high school. My high school experience is an anomaly and is not the norm. As an educator, I want to make all my students feel welcome. I have seen students be treated abnormally by teachers or labeled as a “handful” or “piece of work.”

I started working in recreation centers in 2005. Before working in recreation centers, I volunteered for a year after my supervisor from my first job at the North Carolina Museum of Life and Science introduced me to the work. Before working in one, I had never even stepped foot in a recreation center. Her job was to work with teenagers, so I started working with them and organizing performing arts groups, supervising three dance instructors. Being an introvert, I was able to meet different people and build relationships with teens that I would never have had the opportunity to do. I met one of my first teens when he was 13 and is now about to be 30, and we still have a close bond. I have worked in four local parks and recreation departments and recreation centers. In the recreation center, my job was to build their teen program, give teenagers a safe place to congregate, and create a welcoming environment. I always say teens will come to the facility because of the amenities, but they stay because of the relationships you build with them. I chose to pursue this dissertation topic by hearing their stories over the years and knowing their relationship with the school.

Anyone who truly knows me would tell you that I have two professions, one with education and one with recreation. Both professions are different in their way, but both are very similar in where you work with adolescents in a particular setting. Schools are structured

differently than recreation centers. That is just the nature of the work itself. In addition, the comfort level of participants in a recreational setting is different than in a school setting.

Significance

Discrimination disproportionately affects Black males in their community and schools (Hussain & Jones, 2021). This occurs with the increased police attention in their communities, being killed at a higher percentage in the community, and encountering higher discipline referral rates in schools. As a result of these external factors, right now, this time the pressures that Black males face are more significant within the national climate. Increasing spaces where Black males feel a greater sense of belonging will not only increase their success rates in these spaces (Strayhorn et al., 2015) but will also increase their mental health since there is a direct causation between mental health and an increased sense of belonging (Hagerty et al., 1992). Community members and culturally responsive school leaders should strive to create spaces where all individuals feel welcomed and heard.

In this study, I strove to spotlight and affirm the voices of Black teen males to express where they felt the most welcomed, why they felt the most welcomed there, and what was different about the space that made them feel so welcoming. The knowledge obtained through interviews gave me a greater understanding of what is needed to recreate that increased sense of belonging in other spaces. By recreating the increased sense of belonging, I hope Black male teens find these places more inviting, which, in turn, will increase their well-being and success.

Summary

In this chapter, I addressed the growing concern about police brutality in our community and discipline rates in schools. These issues explain why the Black male teenage sense of belonging is essential. Also, in this chapter, I explored more about myself as a researcher, my

lived experiences, and why I am so passionate about this topic. Additionally, I review the main research questions, and all others will connect back to those fundamental research questions.

In Chapter II, I describe research regarding Black males and belonging and research related to African American males' sense of belonging in schools, recreation centers, and the community. These three topics will provide insight into past research and guide the trajectory of this ongoing research. In Chapter III, I describe the findings of the study. In Chapter IV, I share my findings and recommendations for culturally responsive leaders and community members.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I first focus on research on Black males' sense of belonging in K-12 schools and higher education. In addition, I explore the role of recreation centers and pertinent research that speaks to their sense of belonging in the community. According to Hussain and Jones (2021), belonging is a sense of connection to or integration into a community. I used this definition since it encompasses the general connection to a particular space.

Black Male Belonging in Education

Black Male Belonging in K-12 Schools

Much of the previous research has explored the notion of Black males' sense of belonging in K-12 schools. Belonging in this context is related to identity through students' interactions with their school peers. That is, the students, their peers, and other individuals at their places of learning dictate how they feel about themselves and how they see themselves. There are a few themes that emerge when looking at this literature overall. These themes are various factors that aid or hinder belonging in schools, how belonging affects social-emotional well-being, labels placed on Black male students and how this can affect belonging, and lastly, students having adults in the school buildings that look like them. I explore each topic and its accompanying literature in depth in this section.

Brooms (2019a) explored belonging and how individuals saw themselves in his study of 20 students who attended Frederick Douglas Academy, an all-boys, urban high school. The students he interviewed were all identified as low-income, urban Black males. He asked them questions to understand how attending Fredrick Douglas Academy prepared them for college and what kept them motivated in school. Based on the interviews, he found that the school culture, relationship with teachers, and the overall motivation they received from the school played into

their overall belonging in school. It also helped that it was an all-boys school to create a sense of brotherhood amongst the young men who attended Fredrick Douglas Academy. “Race and identity are critical for understanding patterns of belonging, motivation, and performance” (Gray et al., 2018, p. 97). Overall, the individuals identified belonging through school culture and their interaction with teachers as critical to their academic success at Fredrick Douglas Academy and later college experiences (Broom, 2019a).

Boston and Warren (2017) surveyed 105 Black students (54% male) in the 10th to 12th grades who attended an urban high school in Southern California. This study aimed to see if there was a correlation between belonging in a school setting, centrality, and GPA. The study found a direct correlation between feeling a sense of belonging in schools and the student’s grades. In addition, they found that for urban high school Black students, centrality was the highest statistical predictor of a student’s sense of belonging. Centrality in the study was used in the sense of “dominance of an individual’s race to his perception of self-concept” (Boston & Warren, 2017, p. 27). The Boston and Warren (2017) study suggests that schools that support students’ racial identity greatly enhance their connection to school. Brooms (2019a) found that students can far exceed their educational expectations and thrive in the right environment.

Students need to feel like they belong to increase student learning, motivation, and engagement (Booker, 2006). Booker (2006) reviewed several earlier studies to compose her article on the sense of belonging among Black adolescents in high school. Her research focuses on two leading indicators of belonging: participation and motivation. She argues that a sense of belonging in high school mainly depends on participation. Booker (2006) defines participation as attending school, engaging in extracurricular activities, and performing school leadership roles, including governance. This is true for students of all ethnic backgrounds but more accurate for

students of color in predominantly white environments. Booker (2006) presents motivation in two schools of thought. The first, from older research, says that students must be motivated to reach their full potential (Booker, 2006). According to this theory, students need to feel accepted and have a sense of belonging to the people closest to them, increasing motivation. The more modern view of motivation speaks to the feeling that Black students correlate with their upward social mobility. Since they do not see that increased achievement efforts will better their lives in the long run, they are less motivated in school now (Booker, 2006). This creates a domino effect of lower academic performance as the outcome of this decision.

Anderson (2016) studied the persistence of Black males and what factors made them successful in mathematics, as indicated by the number of Black males taking calculus by 11th grade. Previous studies found that academic identity is also a determining factor in student success. Anderson (2016) describes academic identity as focused on motivation to succeed, belief in one's ability, positive self-definition, and identification of a caring and encouraging teacher. This definition aligns with how Frederick Douglass Academy increased student achievement by giving them the skills to believe in themselves (Brooms, 2019a). Giving students that type of structured and intentional motivation aids their academic identity. Academic identity, in this case, is similar to racial identity. Both concepts refer to intrinsic and extrinsic factors that dictate how students see themselves. This has a dramatic effect on their achievement.

Anderson (2016) found that for Black male students to succeed in mathematics, schools must partner with colleges to enhance summer programming, invite science and math guest speakers, and conduct field trips related to math and science. Similarly, looking at successful Black males, McGee (2013) interviewed 11 high-achieving Black males to investigate the risk and protective factors for their community. All participants attended a charter school in the

Midwest USA, and they categorized high achievement by having a grade point average (GPA) of 3.0 or higher. From her research, McGee (2013) found three themes: racial stereotypes, complications with being perceived as a threat and feeling threatened, and lack of college-related experiences. These communities are more than likely viewed in terms of a deficit mindset, the same as those living there (McGee, 2013).

Other studies looked at Black males' labels in schools and society and how those labels affected their academic careers. Educators and service providers previously had complications with ensuring the academic success of Black male students, primarily due to stereotypical images of Black males as unintelligent and delinquent (Carey, 2019). Grace (2020) reported that in schools, Black males outnumber their white counterparts concerning exceptional services in the eligibility area of cognitively disabled or emotionally disturbed. Black male students are also more likely to be referred for subjective infractions (e.g., disobedience, defiance of authority, and disrespect of authority; Young et al., 2018).

Marsh and Noguera (2018) also assert that society considers Black males to be among the most "at-risk" populations. This distinction allows school personnel to place Black students in remediation programs (Marsh & Noguera, 2018). Programs designed for students of color are often derogatorily termed "toilet programs" as they aim to remove less-desirable students from the mainstream population (Marsh & Noguera, 2018). Consequently, teachers alienate students with this label, as Marsh and Noguera (2018) reported. Kinloch et al. (2017) found after speaking with two Black males that they felt that the teachers feared them because they were Black, and they did not have hope for them. Their teachers and other relevant adults in their schools gave this perception to them. Both students felt the need to walk away from school because of this.

Experiences such as these can lead to a decreased sense of belonging in school and increase Black males' resentment toward the institution of schooling.

Marsh and Noguera (2018) also studied the negative impact of labeling on Black male students and how a charter school tried to counteract those effects. The school started an Excellence Counts group to change the narrative from "at-risk" to high achievers. Individuals in this program were held to higher academic standards and immersed in anti-racist strategies at all times. The school even partnered with a local non-profit whose goal was to change the narrative about Black men in the community. Students in this charter school had a cohort of classmates they stayed with and built a sense of brotherhood (Marsh & Noguera, 2018). Being a part of the Excellence Counts group gave students confidence and built their identities as Black males (Marsh & Noguera, 2018)—this increased identity awareness and sense of belonging, which increased their academic performance.

Ezikwelu (2020) also explored a sense of belonging among Black students (both males and females) in more typical K-12 classrooms. Students recounted their experiences in schools that hindered their sense of belonging. One participant shared that his sixth-grade teacher was racist because of her attitude and mannerisms towards him (Ezikwelu, 2020). Ezikwelu (2020) speaks of a phenomenon called "racial battle fatigue theory" (p. 2), where students feel the stressors of race-based discriminatory practices by white dominant teachers. Experiences related to this theory alter the psychological health of Black students and hinder their sense of belonging in schools (Ezikwelu, 2020).

The effect of labeling can go beyond the relationship of adults to students. It also affects how students see themselves. Smith and Hope (2020) researched stereotypes Black male students placed on themselves and others. In their youth participatory action research (YPAR) study, they

interviewed five Black male high school students and gave them cameras. The school, Lakeside, is diverse in its racial demographic. One of the school's main philosophies is the "politics of respectability" (Smith & Hope, 2020, p. 560), which means students should critique themselves and not the school for their achievements. In short, Black students' lower achievement was the fault of the Black students. For the project, they were to take pictures around their school to document their experiences. This was part of a larger project called the Voice Project, which is a way to lift student voices and create a way to promote the school to Black boys. Analyzing the interview transcripts and the photos, they found that students were aware of labels placed on them and other Black youth (Smith & Hope, 2020). They discussed stereotypes placed on them, which labeled them as ignorant and violent. The Black students' shared experiences showed the researchers that they have low public regard and feel like they have to adopt an oppressed minority mindset (Smith & Hope, 2020.) This type of experience can lead them to feel less than adequate compared to the majority population.

Other research assessed the sense of belonging among former high school students. Grace (2020) discussed the sense of belonging in ten Black males who recently dropped out of high school. Participants shared the experiences they had with teachers and administrators as well as other reasons that they did not feel successful in school. One major factor discussed was that they lacked a sense of belonging in their schools. The majority of the participants saw school as a place that did not assist Black males, stating that only basketball and football players belonged if they were Black males (Grace, 2020). Grace (2020) also shared that another factor that students stated hindered their sense of belonging was a lack of individuals to relate to. When the majority (76%) of the teaching force is middle-class white women, it is hard for students to find teachers to whom they can relate or understand as individuals (Grace, 2020). In addition, Marsh and

Noguera (2018) found that teachers also lack an understanding of their students' cultural norms and values. This is evident from research completed by Caton (2012), where she looked at Black male perspectives of their experiences in high school. Based on the study, she found that surveillance and zero-tolerance security methods hindered students' sense of belonging in high school. This diminished sense of belonging led to increased dropout rates among Black boys (Caton, 2012).

In Grace's (2020) study, students shared that "they don't feel welcomed" (p. 43) in their respective schools and felt that the school made blatant attempts to push them out. When students share their thoughts about school and feel like this, it is understandable that they will not be successful. A school is a place where they do not feel comfortable. "Students tend to develop a sense of belongingness in environments they perceive as nurturing and supportive of their social, emotional, and academic needs" (Caton, 2012, p. 1074). Using student voices to help shape school policy and practices would help create a greater sense of belonging for these students and those who follow them. This will help create spaces where fewer students feel dropping out is a viable solution. Drolet and Arcand (2013) also found that teenagers and their peer groups played an integral part in whether students felt like they belonged in the school. In this study, they interviewed 12- to 13-year-olds about their sense of belonging and their positive development. Note that this study included youth of all races, primarily from upper-middle-class families.

Summary

In this section, I examined multiple scholars who have researched Black males' sense of belonging in K-12 schools. Their studies examined the factors that increase Black students' belonging in various settings in education based on how they see themselves (Brooms, 2019a),

participation and motivation in schools (Booker, 2006), persistence in mathematics (Anderson, 2016), and the effects of labeling (Marsh & Noguera, 2018). My study added to this existing conversation around belonging in K-12 education by allowing students to share what schools and community spaces, such as recreation centers, can do to increase their sense of belonging.

Black Males Belonging in Higher Education

Scholars have reviewed the topic of Black males' sense of belonging in multiple higher education settings, from community colleges to predominantly white institutions. Black males have more racial stress than Latinos and Asian Americans at predominantly white collegiate institutions (Strayhorn et al., 2015). Existing research found three key themes helpful in high-achieving Black males in the university setting: institutional climate, support from peers and staff, and an overall sense of belonging (Strayhorn et al., 2015). As a marginalized population with a history of exclusionary tactics (including in-school discipline procedures to separate but equally segregated schooling) placed on them, having a sense of belonging is vital for the success of Black males (Hussain & Jones, 2021). In their study, Hussain and Jones (2021) surveyed college students to gauge their lived experiences related to their sense of belonging in higher education and how that correlates with experiences of discrimination. Hussain and Jones (2021) found that students who reported increased incidents of discrimination and bias had a decreased sense of belonging. This was mainly true for students of color. Hussain and Jones (2021) also found that Black students' sense of belonging increases when they have diverse friends. Hussain and Jones (2021) found that having a friend group at the college or university also increased their sense of belonging.

In addition, Newman et al. (2015) explored Black males' perceptions of belonging with community college faculty members. As a result of this study, Newman et al. (2015) found that

as the participants' ages increased, their sense of belonging also increased. Maturity plays a significant part in the individual's sense of belonging (Newman et al., 2015).

Chang (2005) explored the interaction between faculty and staff at the community college level. He constructed a 47-question interview and sent it out to 5000 students at nine community colleges in the Los Angeles area. He mainly wanted to look at students of color and how their interactions with faculty hindered or increased the students' sense of belonging. The student's age positively correlated with interaction with faculty members. Chang (2005) found that Black students interacted more with their professors, primarily by asking questions after class.

Another factor that plays a role in the overall sense of belonging is the ethnicity of the friend group of the person of color. Hussain and Jones (2021) found that Year 4 students with a less diverse friend group had a lower sense of belonging and increased experiences of discrimination. This study showed that not only do internal factors such as maturity affect belonging, but external factors like the friends we have around us also affect our sense of belonging. With all these factors affecting individuals' sense of belonging, talking to students to gather more information about what has worked for them would be vital in creating spaces where they feel a sense of belonging moving forward. Changing policies and procedures in these spaces has successfully created spaces where Black males feel an increased sense of belonging.

Some historically white colleges and institutions have seen a need to engage better with Black males, who have experienced more problems (e.g., retention, academic success, and persistence) in historically white institutions than any other racial group (Brooms, 2019b). Seeing this as a significant issue, some historically white colleges have implemented Black male initiative programs where Black male students can have a place where they can talk about issues pertinent to them in a safe space with each other and with staff members at the college or

university. Brooms (2019b) interviewed 63 Black male students who attended historically white colleges. The participants in the study ranged from first-year students to recent graduates, and majors spanned many disciplines. Including males in the Black Male Initiative program provided them with a community, as Brooms (2019b) found. They found that belonging to this group helped them become more connected to the whole college community (Brooms, 2019b). That community also assisted in having a group of peers uplift each other and motivate the group members to keep going and persevere (Brooms, 2019b). Black male initiatives like this show how vital shared experiences are in creating a sense of belonging, even in environments where Black males are the vast minority.

Like Brooms (2019b), other studies have examined the relationship between peer groups and Black males' sense of belonging. Graham and McClain (2019) explored the relationship between peer mentorship, belonging, and imposter feelings among Black college students, both male and female. Graham and McClain (2019) used a mixed-methods approach to examine the risk factors and protective factors of mentorship among Black college students. For the study, they referred to Black college students as Black collegians. They surveyed 117 students, 92 females and 25 males, who attended a predominantly white institution. To measure belonging, they used the campus connectedness scale, which measures feelings of connectedness to a university campus. Graham and McClain (2019) found that mentorship and college adjustment most influenced these students' belonging. The researchers defined mentorship as informal and formal, as well as having someone of a similar race and age to you that helps advise you about what classes to take and where to go on campus. College adjustment was defined by how well the individuals adjusted to college life (Graham & McClain, 2019). Having a mentor helped students adjust to college and feel a stronger sense of belonging to the university (Graham &

McClain, 2019). Studies such as Brooms (2019b) and Graham and McClain (2019) underscore the importance of having peers who can help Black males feel connected to schools.

Summary

In this section, I discussed belonging in higher education. The findings in this section mirrored those of the previous discussion of belonging in K-12 schools. Based on the results of the studies I analyzed, college and high school students required the same factors that increased belonging in both settings. Age does not change the factors needed to feel welcomed in a particular space.

Black Male Belonging in Recreation Centers and the Community

Historically, recreation centers have been spaces where the community can come together to celebrate life experiences while providing services to enhance the community (Kelly Pryor & Outley, 2014). The term recreation center is broad, encompassing private, for-profit recreational facilities and government recreation facilities operated by the local Parks and Recreation department. For this study, I focused on the latter type of recreation facilities, which are different from profit-based facilities since they do not require a membership to use their facilities. The local government-run recreation centers offer most teenage activities like afterschool programs and open gyms free of charge to provide accessible, age-appropriate programming for youth.

Having activities for teens is especially important in areas that suffer from much youth-related crime. For example, Weibe et al. (2016) mapped out the activity paths of 10- to 24-year-olds in a local hospital. By mapping out the participants' locations and other individuals they were with, the researchers explored risk factors that contribute to violent crimes in their community. Weibe et al. (2016) found that adolescents who visited recreation centers were less likely to participate in gun violence. Conversely, in areas where the participants do not have

access to recreation centers, youth are more likely to fall prey to gun violence. The decrease in the risk of gun violence was primarily because one of the main factors involved being in a community setting with other people (Weibe et al., 2016). Weibe et al. (2016) found the risk increased when individuals were alone.

In another study, social justice was one of the issues individuals would discuss when they came together in recreation centers in the 1950s. The notion of these spaces amid social justice discussions still permeates today (Kelly Pryor & Outley, 2014). This is evident in the medium-sized metropolitan area where I completed my study. Recreation centers are meeting places for Partner Against Crime (PAC) meetings, therefore serving as a space where the community can speak to city officials and police officers about current issues plaguing their neighborhoods. Similarly, Bustad and Andrews (2017) found that recreation centers in Baltimore, MD, were used for Police Athletic Leagues, where young Black males played basketball against other youth in the city. This also helps the community create a dialogue with the police and advocate for their needs. Advocating for oneself and one's community is directly aligned with social justice. This speaks to the importance of these spaces for the community as a whole.

For Black males, having a place in the community they can go to as a stress reliever is vital. This is a different environment from the urban community itself, where Black males are more likely than white males to have unwelcome police interactions (Brunson & Weitzer, 2009). In addition, recreational programming, such as after-school programs, has been found to increase the educational and social outcomes for Black males living in urban settings (Woodland, 2014). In his study, Woodland (2014) reviewed literature focused on risks, resilience, and after-school programming to explore ways to increase Black males' educational and social outcomes. He found that participation in structured programs during the hours right after school helped

decrease discipline infractions and increase the participants' grades and confidence (Woodland, 2014). The study also found five strategies that foster resilience: reduce vulnerability, reduce stressors, increase available resources, mobilize protective processes, and utilize culture as an asset (Woodland, 2014). PAL basketball games created a space for Black male youth to play basketball when recreation centers closed due to financial problems in Baltimore, Maryland. This mainly occurred in neighborhoods of color (Bustad & Andrews, 2017). According to Bustad and Andrews (2017), before these leagues began, parents' only option for recreational programming for their youth was fee-based, private facilities. This article addresses the need and impact of recreation programming for Black males.

Other scholars have focused on the correlation between recreation and belonging. Miller (2011) found that campuses with vital recreation programs have a higher sense of belonging with their students. This study utilized a questionnaire to gauge the correlation between student perceptions of the university recreation center related to bonding, attraction, and retention. He found a direct correlation between students' sense of belonging and bonding with other students at the university recreation center. An indicator of a student's retention of a college or university is their sense of belonging to that institution (Miller, 2011). Even though it focused on a college campus, this study shows the need for recreational programming to create a bond with participants. In their 2021 study, Bean et al. explored the relationship between recreational programming and belonging, focusing on the basic human need to connect to others. They found that youth who have experiences in recreational activities (e.g., organized sports) are more likely to have their basic needs met, including the need to feel connected to others.

In a broader sense, Black males are alienated from the community (Brunson & Weitzer, 2009). Despite this alienation in the greater community, Black people have used similar colors

and clothing messaging to create a minor sense of community within the larger ones (Gray et al., 2018). Brooms (2015) discussed the neighborhood's change as the source of the Black downfall from a historical context to now. In his research, he discussed two factors: industrialization and economic restructuring and the exodus of the middle class (Brooms, 2015). Brooms (2015) found these factors directly affect poverty, unemployment, and urban crime in inner-city neighborhoods. Through interviewing 20 Black males between the ages of 20 and 23, he found themes in their accounts of their community in inner-city Chicago. The themes that arose were "it was the hood," meaning how the participants felt about the neighborhood, "it was something every day," which speaks to their experiences, and "the neighborhood doesn't define who I am," which speaks to their sense of self and resilience (p. 273). All of the males chosen for this study graduated high school and attended college at the time of the study.

Multiple studies have shown various negative factors, such as the lack of available jobs and policing strategies that target young Black males, that encourage adverse outcomes for urban youth, especially for young Black males (Woodland, 2014). One of the policing strategies that multiple scholars have researched is the stop-and-frisk policing strategy. Wallace (2018) conducted 60 in-depth interviews with Black male youth in New York and London. He found that these individuals were stopped and frisked for various reasons, including style of dress, time of day they were out, and the peers they associated with. Many of the individuals in New York felt less comfortable in their communities because of the increased police presence and the likelihood of them being stopped and frisked (Wallace, 2018). Even when Black males are the victims, the media typically depicts them as the aggressors who are evil, strange, or threatening. Toward this point, Stone and Socia (2017) looked at over 160 web pages (online and print) to view the perception of Black males following the shooting of Tamir Rice. In their study, they

found that the media frames the narrative from the view of the police, which paints Black males in an unfavorable light (Stone & Socia, 2017).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined research related to Black males' sense of belonging in education, both in K-12 and higher education. I also examined the overall feeling of belonging for Blacks in the community and schools and how the portrayal of Blacks occurs in the community. In school, there is a high correlation between belonging and student achievement (Grace, 2020). There is also a relationship in youth between actively engaging in recreational activities and gaining a higher sense of belonging (Bean et al., 2021).

Multiple entities comprise the community as a whole. Schools and recreation centers are just two of these entities within a community. Creating a sense of belonging for Black male youth in these spaces increases the chances of their feeling a sense of belonging to a community. Belonging to a community does more for the individual than help them feel connected. It shows the individual they are a part of something bigger than themselves. It also helps with the individual's mental health (Billingsley & Hurd, 2019). Neighborhood dynamics of Black communities influence various things, such as civic engagement, health outcomes, and opportunities professionally and personally (Brooms, 2015). This is particularly important for Black males since, according to the National Institute on Minority and Health Disparities, Black males are four to six times more likely to die by suicide than Black women (Joe et al., 2017). This startling statistic makes it vital to create places where Black males feel valued, welcomed, and heard. Conversations with teens will help us find ways to make them feel like valuable community members.

After reviewing scholarship on Black males belonging in schools, recreation centers, and community entities, I conclude that there is a need for more research. Much of the existing research speaks to a sense of belonging for teens in one particular setting or a sense of belonging for adults in college. Most teenagers felt a higher sense of belonging in recreation centers rather than schools. Recreation centers are places where teenagers choose to go, which means they have a say in whether they go there, and these spaces are not compulsory to attend, like schools. My research project adds to the existing scholarship so schools can learn directly from Black males about what helps them feel connected and welcomed. This research can help educators and recreation center staff make Black male teenagers feel more connected and welcomed in those spaces.

CHAPTER III: FINDINGS

Chapter II revealed how Black males experience belonging, which has been studied extensively over the past few decades. My study compares how this group understands belonging in schools and recreation centers. For the study, I interviewed eight Black teenagers. Each participant had a one-on-one interview with me that lasted approximately one hour. Four of the eight teenagers joined the focus group, which lasted approximately 2 hours. All participants were 18 or 19 years old and currently or recently attended high school in Campbell, a medium-sized metropolitan city. Six of the eight teens attended Woodland Recreation Center, and the remaining two attended Elmore Recreation Center.

This chapter consists of two sections. In the first section, I provide brief profiles of each participant to introduce them and a brief description of the recreation centers and schools the participants attended. In the second section, I describe pertinent themes that arose during the interviews and the focus group session. The themes I present represent my findings. In Chapter IV, I use the findings to answer my study's research questions on African-American male teenagers' experiences and perceptions of belonging in schools and recreation centers and their recommendations for improvement.

Setting and Participant Profiles

Setting

Recreation Centers

The study participants attended two recreation centers and five schools in Campbell City or County limits. The two recreation centers are approximately two miles apart but serve vastly different communities. The schools differ in size and demographic characteristics. Below, I

briefly describe each recreation center, its history, the current neighborhood surrounding it, and the schools attended by the participants.

Woodland Recreation Center. **Woodland Recreation Center** is less than one mile from a major university. The building is the third iteration of a recreational facility at the same site. The first was a tennis club for an affluent Black community that hosted tennis stars like Arthur Ashe before their time. A fire destroyed the second building, leading to the construction of the current one on the same land in the 1970s. From 1970 until now, Woodland Recreation Center has undergone several renovations, the last being in 2020. The area around Woodland Recreation Center has undergone extensive gentrification in the past 15 years.

The neighborhood used to have affordable housing several blocks down the street and in the adjacent community behind the center. These communities were predominantly low-income, Black homes. The city demolished the affordable housing units and left vacant lots where low-income dwellings adjacent to the recreation center used to be. Single homes with prices starting in the mid-\$300,000 now surround the Woodland Recreation Center in the community behind and across the street from the center. Once, teens walked to Woodland; now, every teen that attends is dropped off or catches the bus to get there.

Elmore Recreation Center. A church and the City of Campbell dually own **Elmore Recreation Center**. Elmore was built in the 1920s and was initially the Elmore Elementary School serving the surrounding community. The community historically has been predominantly Black. During the 1980s, the growth of Campbell led to the construction of newer schools. Elmore became obsolete, and people stopped using it, eventually abandoning it. As a result, it no longer served any educational purpose. Community members renovated the former school in the

1990s with the help of funds from the City of Campbell. The neighborhood now utilizes the former school as a recreation center and hosts events for the church.

The community around the Elmore Recreation Center has mostly stayed the same. Anchored by the church that partially owns the Elmore Recreation Center, the community's demographics have not changed. Gentrification, which has affected so many low-income, Black neighborhoods around Campbell, has not affected the Elmore community. Therefore, most teens attending the Elmore Recreation Center live within walking distance of the center and feed from the neighborhood.

Schools

The participants in the study represented five high schools in Campbell. Most of the schools are all approximately the same size except one. Of the high schools represented in this study, Hawkins has the most with 1,939 students, followed by Jacobson with 1,475, Eastern with 1,307, Sacajawea with 1,269 students, and Hawley with 395 students. The schools also vary in location around the city of Campbell.

Hawley is an early college school where students can obtain college credit and experience college classes while still in high school. Hawkins is located in the city of Campbell and used to house a middle school in the facility before becoming a high school. After the merger between the city and county schools, a new middle school was erected about a mile away. The city of Campbell hosts Sacajawea, a school constructed in the 1990s as the second iteration of the facility. They built the first across town in the 1960s. Jacobson is a historically Black high school that has existed for 150 years in Campbell and is in its third location. Eastern serves the more rural areas in Campbell County.

Larger, comprehensive high schools offer more opportunities for athletic programs since smaller schools do not offer them. However, students can participate in athletics at a larger school if they attend a smaller specialty school such as Hawley. All the schools are within the Campbell Public School system, which serves the city and county of Campbell.

Participant Profiles

Table 1. Participant Pseudonyms, Race, and Age

Student Name	Race	Age	High School	Recreation Center
Nathan	Black	18	Hawkins	Woodland
Norris	Black	19	Hawkins	Woodland
Bart	Black	19	Hawley	Woodland
Tevin	Mixed-Race	19	Hawley	Woodland
Landon	Black	18	Sacajawea/Jacobson	Woodland
Ansel	Black	19	Hawley	Elmore
Reed	Black	18	Eastern	Woodland
Elijah	Black	19	Eastern	Elmore

Nathan

Nathan was one of the youngest participants in the study. He recently turned 18 and attended Hawkins High School in Campbell, NC. Nathan lives in a single-parent home with his mother and two little brothers. He was the primary caregiver for his brothers when his mother was at work. He mostly stays to himself and does not attend many school events or like to be around people unless he knows you. In other words, Nathan has a guarded personality. Nathan enjoys playing basketball with friends and playing NBA 2K on PlayStation. He only plays with

teams, which is for the recreation league. He has been attending the Woodland Recreation Center for approximately 5 years now.

Norris

Norris is 19 and recently graduated from Hawkins High School in Campbell. Norris lives with his aunt and has lived with her for the past year after living in multiple homes with his mother, two little brothers, one little sister, and an older brother. He is a teenager who is not excited or flustered easily. He does like going out to events with friends or people he has known for a while. Norris likes playing basketball and football with friends. He has never played on an organized school team but did play in the recreation league for the Woodland Recreation Center. He has attended the recreation center for approximately 5 years.

Bart

Bart is 19 and recently graduated from Hawley High School in Campbell. He had a different high school experience since he could take collegiate courses while in high school. He lives with his mother and has a close relationship with his family. Bart enjoys playing basketball, going to the mall, and parties with friends. He has never played organized basketball for a school team but did play with the recreation league for the Woodland Recreation Center. While in high school, Bart did play football. He has been attending the center for about 4 years.

Tevin

Tevin is new to Woodland Recreation Center but enjoys going since one of his family members works there, and he has made friends there since attending. Tevin is a 19-year-old mixed-race teen who recently graduated from Hawley High School. Like Bart, he also took college courses during high school. Tevin enjoys playing basketball with friends and likes to go

out to parties. Tevin is a social butterfly. He lives with his mother and his little brother. Tevin has been going to the Woodland Recreation Center for approximately a year.

Landon

Landon is an 18-year-old teenager who has attended Woodland Recreation Center for approximately 3 years. He started coming after COVID-19 with Nathan, whom he calls his brother. Currently, Landon is between homes with his mother and his grandmother but does not call either location home. He has a couple of younger sisters who live at his mother's house. Landon has not yet graduated from high school due to suspensions and behavior. Jacobson High School in Campbell was the last high school he attended. He is known for getting into fights at school. He likes to play basketball with friends to relieve stress. He has not played for an organized team at school but has played for the recreation league for the Woodland Recreation Center.

Ansel

Ansel is a 19-year-old teenager who attends the Elmore Recreation Center. He hopes to graduate with an occupational course of study high school equivalent diploma from Hawkins High School in Campbell. Ansel lives with his mother and does not usually go out with friends. He comes to the recreation center to get out of the house and engage in various activities. Ansel likes to play video games and basketball. He does not play organized basketball with his school but does play on the Elmore Recreation League team.

Reed

Reed is 18 and recently graduated from Eastern High School in Campbell. He lived with his father after his parents divorced. Reed has moved around and lived in many places in Campbell, now on the east end of town. He enjoys playing basketball for fun, but his real passion

lies in playing football and running track. Reed has just received a scholarship to play football at a UNC System School about an hour and a half outside Campbell. He primarily attends Woodland Recreation Center in Campbell. Reed also is a social butterfly who likes to go out with friends to parties. Even though he is friends with many people, he mainly stays to himself.

Elijah

Elijah is a 19-year-old teenager who attends Eastern High School. He also would like to graduate with an occupational course of study and a high school equivalent diploma. Elijah has participated at a few high schools in the area before coming to Eastern. He has also gotten in trouble for fighting in school. Elijah currently lives with his mom. He reported that he goes to the center to get away and feels a sense of camaraderie with people who care about him. Elijah enjoys playing basketball and football. He has also played for Elmore Recreation Center in the rec league but does not play for his school team.

Themes

This section discusses the main themes I identified while analyzing the interview and focus group data. The following themes represent my study's findings:

1. Participants had different definitions for belonging and what it felt like, but some common elements were expressed.
2. Most participants felt an increased sense of belonging in recreation centers compared to their schools.
3. In recreation centers, most participants encountered fewer issues with traditional negative stereotypes that typically plague Black males. These stereotypes hindered their sense of belonging in school.

4. Participants reported that peer relationships play a significant role in forming bonds, sharing experiences, and providing mutual support in recreation centers and schools. Improved relationships in peer groups increased their sense of belonging.
5. The participants provided recommendations for schools and recreation centers to increase their sense of belonging in those spaces. Their recommendations for schools included fair discipline practices, building relationships with teens, and having more cultural events. In recreation centers, the recommendation is more community events and activities.

Theme 1

Participants had different definitions for belonging and what it felt like, but some common elements were expressed.

Each participant had a different definition of belonging and how it looked and felt. At the same time, the participants expressed some commonalities in their thoughts about belonging. Belonging is the underlying theme of the entire study. In this section, I will present evidence from the study participants' interviews about how they describe and define a feeling of belonging. I will share the differences and similarities between their descriptions of belonging. Participants described belonging and the feeling of belonging as being a part of their sense of place in the greater community.

The participants' responses varied while discussing their definitions of belonging. Ansel said that belonging to him means, "I get to show people that I am good and I can do school right. They can see that I am good and a good person." Landon thought of belonging as being "... a nice vibe. You don't have to worry much and can just be yourself. Everybody just chilling, being

themselves. We all just vibing.” The word “vibe” is a local colloquialism that means overall feeling. Reed thought of belonging by saying,

As far as school, I’m not going to say I make myself feel like I belong, but you have to make yourself a big part of the community. Find what you are good at so you can do it and so you will have something to school for. I chose sports because I like sports and that’s what I am good at. So, I am a part of the community because of sports.

Elijah shared, “Being somewhere you feel accepted. That is what belonging means to me.”

Nathan explained,

I don’t want to say like a category or not really fitting in because only some people are going to fit into a category, more of being able to get along with everyone that is there and have fun in general. Everyone have fun and chill. No one has beef, and we just get along.

Bart saw belonging differently than the other participants,

It is just a system. Not even being comfortable. More like somebody helping you express your culture. As to who you are and what your vision is. I feel like something that definitely brings you more connected to your community, not only with just individuals but just the things around your community, like what happens around it. If you live in the projects and there is one school, what’s happening in the school system or basketball games that happens around you? Stuff like that.

The factors that increase the feelings of belonging vary from person to person. To Norris, “people not mumbling under their breath or looking at you a certain way” means belonging to a particular place. Tevin responded similarly to belonging being caused by external factors when belonging implies that “people look up to me, and I am a role model to them.” Based on the

participants' responses, it is safe to say that what makes them feel like they belong in an area is relative to their personality. This feeling comes from their interactions with others.

Each of the participants shared what a sense of belonging felt like to them to enhance their definition of belonging. Tevin shared,

I feel more comfortable with the people I was with. It feels like they can accept me more, and I can be myself. I don't have to be fake or try to be someone I am not. It just feels right, ya know? Like they can accept me for who I am, be free, and be me.

As Bart just said,

Everyone rocked with me, hyped me up when I was playing basketball. If I make a shot, everyone was happy for me, even if they were not on my team, they still cheered me on. It just felt really good to be in that kind of environment.

Bart's response to belonging is similar to how Landon spoke about the "vibe" of the center. He merely uses different verbiage. Nathan responded,

The people I was with made me feel more laid back. It's like we were all in sync and just felt right. I could feed off of their energy, and we would just vibe. No hate or nothing. No one trying to undercut nobody else. We just all got along, really.

Though the participants had personal definitions of belonging, they also stated some common beliefs about the concept. For instance, the question I felt had the most significant impact on their thinking was when I asked them if a sense of belonging was more about mutual respect, acceptance, or what other word they would describe. Bart immediately identified mutual respect. He added,

No matter what room I go in, I am going to be myself. Either you gonna rock with me or not. And on that same vein, I am going to respect you. That is just how it's gone be, so if you respect me, I am going to give respect right back to ya.

To Bart, respect means a lot regarding belonging. Even during the interview, his voice became louder and more forceful when he responded about respect. Tevin also shared his thoughts:

It's more about mutual respect, too. I'm not forcing you to be my friend or anything. If you want to be and give me respect, then we are good, but if you don't want to be cool with me, it's fine. It's not gonna be no hate towards you. Pray over it, and not gonna beat you down or nothing.

These responses speak to the common idea that mutual respect from others aids the participants in feeling a sense of belonging in a space. This is how belonging looks and feels to them. If teens feel respected, they will feel comfortable in that space and feel connected.

Another commonality is that many participants spoke about belonging in a holistic general sense. When thinking of their response and telling their stories, they related them to schools and recreation centers for the study. While participants expressed the meaning and feeling of belonging differently in their responses, the central common thread in each response was how the people in the space made them feel. According to the participants, belonging itself is not a solitary feeling. To the participants, an increased sense of belonging in the community depends on interactions with the people in that setting. Even though participants verbalized their definition of belonging differently, feeling comfortable and being respected by those in that space was an underlying trait in their thoughts of belonging. In other words, being comfortable and respected in a space increased their sense of belonging. This increased comfort level always

comes from external factors. One thing that remains the same is that belonging cannot be accomplished in isolation and must occur with the aid of others.

Theme 2

Most participants felt an increased sense of belonging in recreation centers compared to their schools.

In this section, I discuss the participants' feelings of belonging related to schools and recreation centers. All the teens I interviewed felt they had an increased sense of belonging in recreation centers rather than schools. However, some teens reported having better school experiences than others, increasing their sense of belonging. The factors that aid in the participants feeling a sense of belonging are the same regardless of location (for example, how people make them feel). I will share first-hand accounts from participants to show why they thought recreation centers increased a sense of belonging and why some felt schools decreased their sense of belonging.

Schools

The participants shared some positive and negative experiences they have had at school. Inequitable discipline practices stuck out to some teens more than other factors. Elijah shared that there is a lack of consequences for behaviors at school, even if it refers to him. "Fair? I don't really think about it, to be honest. Nothing happens if I get written up. I remember one semester I was written up four times in the semester, and nothing happened." Nathan provided a story about how he received a 10-day suspension.

I got suspended for hitting my vape. Look, this is what happened. I was at the bus stop across the street from the school, right? The city bus stop. Two administrators asked me to come with them. I got up and came with them, they confiscated my vape. Then, after

doing that, they proceeded to go through my bag. They then told me that they were suspending me from school for 10 days for puffing a vape on school property. It was a white boy out there with me, and he got nothing or searched, and he was smoking, too.

Nathan shared that this experience at school made him think differently about his administrators.

Landon shared more of his negative experiences at Sacagawea and Jacobson High Schools.

I was known around for fighting. I fought at Sacagawea a lot. I used to fight to let them get the best of me. There were a couple of times that I went to a trusted adult at the school. I would tell them I had a problem and try to talk to them about what's going on. I would even tell them that this person was trying to fight me. They wouldn't do anything, so then I would fight. I think the consequences were not fair because I tried to warn them, but they didn't do nothing. It could have been prevented, but the staff didn't do what they were supposed to do. They just bypassed it. That didn't help at all.

Landon also shared a memorable interaction he had with a school administrator. He explained,

I just don't feel right in school. They get on me for every little thing I do. It's like if I breathe the wrong way then I am going to detention or I get suspended. This one time, I was walking in the halls, and the assistant principal don't like me. He just came out and said he know I did something I did not do because I was here and I was suspended for 5 days. For nothing!

This did not help Landon feel that he belonged in school when he went to adults for help, and he felt like they were not helpful in each situation. After suspending Landon from both schools numerous times, the administrators at Jacobson High School expelled him, and he was no longer

allowed to attend. I asked Landon, “Would you do anything differently if he could do public high school over?” He said, “Yeah, I would try controlling my temper, but it’s hard. I know they don’t want me there, so they got rid of me.”

Reed talked about how he had a realization about his behavior and how it affected his schooling.

Before I moved down here to North Carolina, I was in and out of homes with my mom, and I was into things. Just being immature and into a lot. When I moved down here with my dad, I was still labeled as that bad kid by my teachers. I was in and out of trouble a lot. The summer going into high school, I realized its no point in behaving like that. It didn’t get me anything but a label to be a kid that teachers would not want in their classrooms or make me felt different because they would give me extra attention, and anything I did was wrong. Summer going into tenth grade in high school, I realized it was no purpose. So, I changed my behavior.

Norris recounted some of his discipline issues while at Hawkins High School. He noted,

I remember I got detention. I don’t remember why I got detention, probably was sitting in the wrong seat or something. I did get suspended for 10 days. I stole some money from a white dude. He was selling snacks in the hallway. Nothing happened to the white boy that was selling snacks in school, and you are not supposed to do that. I shouldn’t have done that, but I was hungry, and it ain’t like they was gonna help me. But it is probably because he was the type to always be on the honor roll. The focus of the teachers was mainly on me.

Each student talked about interactions with adults at school and how they relate to discipline that makes them feel like targets. This feeling did not aid in an increased sense of belonging in their school.

I asked the participants whether they wanted to be at school and if they felt like they mattered there. This question helped them talk about their school experiences for them and their classmates. When I asked Elijah if high school is where he or other students like to be, he shared his reflections on high school.

Yes and no. Yes, because it's boring at home and the rec won't be open. No, because my friends are there and it's not boring when they are at school. Some days, I just feel like I don't want to be there.

Ansel had similar feelings about school when he shared,

School is alright, it's ok to go and learn but school is school. It's a means to an end, and I just take it to pass my grade. School is one thing, then the next and next until you graduate and be done.

Norris shared,

Nobody wants to be there because it's school. It sometimes depends on the teachers you have that let you do certain stuff. They will let you eat in class, chew gum in class and other things. As long as you do your work, you can pretty much do what you want. Some folks make you put your phone in your book bag and sit and write notes.

During the focus group, I asked the participants if there was ever a time when they felt left out at school. Bart shared an experience from graduation.

My graduation I felt left out. Before graduation, I saw my name being on this list of students they were nominating for an award during graduation. They took my name off

the list because I graduated early. I was by myself the whole time. I didn't have any functions to go to with my peers. This made me look at my high school differently, but I used it as a learning experience. I actually came back to North Carolina from Chicago for graduation.

In North Carolina, students must attend school until the age of 16. Many students view school as something they must do rather than something they enjoy or value. The participants understood that school is needed to progress to the next level.

Interestingly, there was a clear difference between participants' feelings of belonging in larger and smaller high schools. Bart and Tevin attended the same small school, Hawley High School, and shared similar, more positive experiences of belonging in school. Hawley is located on a college campus and operates as an early college school. Tevin shared that he felt he mattered to staff and students. "People knew me and knew I was a go-getter. The staff wanted to help me get to the next level and knew I was capable of that." The students who went to larger, comprehensive high schools did not have the same positive interactions with staff. Most participants who went to larger schools felt the staff was there mainly for the job. Ansel shared, "I would say it's in the middle. I don't really talk to them, and they don't talk to me, so I just go about my day." As stated previously, Landon felt like some teachers were there for a paycheck and did not care.

Recreation Centers

During the interviews, I asked students similar questions about recreation centers that I had asked them about schools. Even though the participants attended two different recreation centers, most of the experiences they spoke about mirrored each other. I also asked why they participated at the recreation center that they most frequented. The most frequent answer was

because of how the staff and people there made them feel and because of their peer group that attended the center. Ultimately, the recreation centers created a safe space where teenagers felt welcome.

The teens attending Woodland Recreation Center stated they have been going there for years. Norris shared his thoughts on why he felt an increased sense of belonging at the recreation center:

When I walk through the door, everyone greets me by name. Everyone there asks where I see myself in 5-10 years. This lets me know that they are really invested in me and my future. There has never been a time when they made me feel like I did not belong there. Norris smiled as he answered, thinking about interactions at the recreation center.

I have been going there since I was 16. It's like a second home to me. I felt like I was around my people. If I am having a bad day on Friday or during the week, I know I can go there and not be stressed anymore.

Norris talked about the recreation center very fondly, and I could tell by the difference in the cadence of his voice when talking about Woodland that he felt strongly about being there.

Nathan also shared his view on the recreation center, explaining,

I have been going since 6th or 7th grade. I have noticed consistent changes that help better the environment for kids. Newcomers will come back. Woodland has done a good job of being open and being able to keep kids out of trouble. That is why I go there.

Reed shared a similar experience even though he has been going for a while.

Woodland in the center I go to the most. I was introduced to it by a young lady. Since I walked in the front door, it was a welcoming, safe space. I instantly saw it was a great

place to be at. There is always someone there that can help you. It is a safe space for young Black males like me to go to and find a second home.

Both Reed and Norris consider the Woodland Recreation Center a second home to them.

When I asked the Elmore Recreation Center teens why they liked attending, they shared similar experiences. Elijah said, “I have been going there since I was 13. All of my friends used to go there and chill on computers. When I go, I mainly play basketball and just chill there until it closes.” Ansel said this about Elmore Recreation Center: “It’s a good place. I like to chill there, hang out, play video games, and hang out with friends. It’s really just to have something to do.” While responding, Ansel smiled in the interview when he talked about the recreation center.

I also asked the teens about the overall atmosphere of the recreation center they attended. Norris shared,

Feels like a family. With the people that goes there on Fridays and with the staff, it feels like a safe place and a place you can be yourself and have fun, in all, it just feels good.

They always greet me. The way Ms. Sharon greets me with a smile and a hug. The way I get greeted like a bother. Just everyone talking and having a good feeling. Everyone has a smile on their face.

Tevin shared a similar experience:

The vibe is amazing, always on some different good energy. Even if it isn’t a packed gym, it is still always great. Even though it’s not an actual team or tournament, we treat it like it is. It’s always great competition.

Landon shared, “There is nothing that makes me feel unwelcomed. Literally, when I get out the car, I get a family vibe.” The word “family” came up a few times when individuals were expressing the feelings they received at Woodland Recreation Center. When the teens described

Elmore Recreation Center, Ansel said, “It’s good. I feel happy that I get to go there. I can chill with people. I feel excited and stuff and know I can relax.” These anecdotes show that recreation centers create a welcoming environment for teens.

The teens stated that they felt an increased sense of belonging in recreation centers over schools when asked to compare their experiences in both places. During the interview, Landon explained,

I would rather go to the rec center over school any day. There, I feel like they get me and don’t see me as a problem. I remember Mr. Steve asked me one time why don’t I show the same person to him that my teachers see. Like, he doesn’t see the troublemaker, he just sees Landon.

Some of them felt alienated and singled out in schools because of their behavioral challenges and the teachers there. They felt at home in recreation centers because of the familial atmosphere. To this point, Ansel shared,

At Elmore, I can be myself and show the real me to other teens there. The people there pushes me to get to the spot that I want to be, and I want other people to know how it’s like there.

Every teenager shared that they felt welcomed and heard at the recreation center, and it was a place where they wanted to be.

Theme 3

In recreation centers, most participants encountered fewer issues with traditional negative stereotypes that typically plague Black males. These stereotypes hindered their sense of belonging in schools.

Interactions with other people played a part in whether or not teenagers felt like they belonged in schools and recreation centers. Stereotypes affect how others see you and their perceptions of you, affecting how you see yourself. I asked the participants about their experiences with stereotypes and how people perceived them in schools and recreation centers. They shared various instances where they felt judged or stereotyped based on their race. Some participants mentioned that people often saw them as intimidating or aggressive. I asked no specific questions about race since all the teens shared the same racial-ethnic background. However, racial identity emerged in some of their responses during the interviews.

I asked the teens to tell me how they think the school staff sees them related to stereotypes. Reviewing their responses on how people saw them in schools, the majority of the teens shared that the staff saw them in a negative light as it refers to some of the stereotypes that plague Black males. Of the eight interviewed teens, four shared that individuals in the school viewed them as traditional Black male stereotypes. When asked this question, Elijah stated, “They view me as a troublemaker, from the kids to the adults. They think I am loud at school and do what I want.” He was beating his fist against his hand while answering the question. He did not know where this assumption came from but added that he tried not to focus on that.

When I asked Ansel how people perceived him in school, he said,

They think I am a tall guy and think I will do something wrong. Everywhere I go, I see a police officer or staff. It’s like they always think I am going to do something bad or wrong. Just makes me feel bad.

During this part of the interview, Ansel repeatedly put his head down in his hands. His physical response to thinking about this situation spoke to me more than his words alone. We paused the

interview for approximately 5 minutes so that he could gather his thoughts. People thinking of him in such a manner was troubling to him.

Bart had a strong response to the question. He explained,

One hundred percent, I believe they do. A handful I know for sure do. One of my English teachers, she taught British Lit. It was the first semester of my sophomore year, only the second day of class. My friend was sitting with me, and the teacher gone look at me and CJ and said I am surprised y'all made it this far. I could not believe she would say that to my face. It made me not want to indulge in trying to get connected with the school.

Bart became extremely animated when telling this story.

In school, Landon remembered many instances where people negatively stereotyped him.

He explained,

Some of the staff definitely see me as that. They already think I am trouble. Some of them don't even talk to me when I try to engage with them. I remember my math teacher I told her I did not understand a question or a problem. I even asked her respectfully, and she would not help me. I asked a classmate, and she would get mad. Everyone can vouch that happened. A couple days later, I got switched to another class. She didn't even want me in there.

Landon remembered this incident when answering another question. Later, he shared,

The teacher told me they will not help me. Or they would even say things like I heard about you or I know what you did last year. Don't try none of that in here. Like I'm going to do something to them. They also won't help me because of what they think of me or heard what I did last year.

When each of the teens answered the questions, they showed the emotions that the situation spurred in them and how it still affects them. The posture and volume of these individuals were vastly different when talking about how they were affected by these stereotypes in schools than when talking about their feelings at the recreation center.

When explicitly asked about schools, only one of the eight teens interviewed felt that they were not viewed in any negative stereotypical way in school. Nathan shared, “Not really. I try not to give them a reason to. I try to be respectful, and they know I will stay quiet and out of the way.” Personality-wise, Nathan is a quiet kid who mainly stays to himself. He will talk to his circle of friends or with people he is comfortable with, but he will not be the one to initiate a conversation with people he does not know.

During the interviews, I also asked each teenager if anyone at the recreation center perceived them as traditional Black male stereotypes. All the teenagers were optimistic about how individuals viewed them in the recreation center. Ansel shared, “No, because they see me for me, and I can see them as them.” Reed shared, “No, I don’t see that. I am seen as just another kid in the world doing something great.” When Bart answered the question, he said,

No, it don’t matter how much slang I talk or abbreviations I use. They still saw me like I was still communicative as I was an educated individual. I always try to remember if you get respect, you should show respect. And I can tell they respect us there.

While speaking about how the people made him feel at the recreation center, Bart remembered fondly. Norris said, “I can be hyper, but they don’t see me as nothing else. That is all they see.”

Tevin shared,

They see me as higher than what the stereotypes we have been given see me. They see me as a successful Black male who is trying to make a change that others can't make.

They know I want to be better, and they actively help.

Tevin's responses show that he knows the recreation center staff holds him to high expectations and believes he can reach them. He later shared that this additional support helps him perform better in school.

Landon talked about how staff at the recreation center viewed his past differently from school staff. He explained,

The staff at Woodland does not do that. Everyone in school mostly looks at my past.

They just think I am going to fight everybody. When I come into Woodland, my past is erased. They don't look at me like I am angry or anything like that. They just see me for me, and I am glad I have a place like that to go to.

Landon also expressed that his relationship with the staff helped him feel like that. Norris also talked about the relationship with staff at the recreation center when he said,

Our relationship has grown. I can talk to them about anything, and the door is always open. One of the staff members grew into more of a father figure for one. I am even cool with Mr. Black, the center director.

When Norris spoke about his relationships with the recreation center staff, it seemed that the staff cared for him and helped him see past himself in the view of traditional stereotypes, even if the school views him that way.

The experiences that the individuals spoke of within the recreation center helped increase their feelings of belonging. The common factors are having people who care for you and have

your best interests at heart. This increases their sense of belonging in that space and helps them feel more connected to the recreation center.

Theme 4

Participants reported that peer relationships play a significant role in forming bonds, sharing experiences, and providing mutual support in recreation centers and schools.

Improved relationships in peer groups increased their sense of belonging.

Peer groups are integral to whether an individual feels they belong in a particular space. I asked the teens about their peer groups in schools and recreation centers. In schools, the question was how they related to other students inside and outside their circle of friends. The teens felt they related more to teens within their peer group than those outside of it. Peer relationships play a significant role in forming bonds, sharing experiences, and providing mutual support.

Forming Bonds

The teens shared information about forming bonds with other individuals during the interview. The term “forming bonds” was not explicitly stated; however, their responses alluded to the idea that building connections with people increases their sense of belonging.

The participants connected their responses about students in their school and recreation center peer group. Landon shared,

We don't even look at each other as individuals. It's like we are one rather than individuals. Everyone play a part to make us one or the system work. We all get along so well, like we were meant to be together. With people that is not in my friend group, I don't talk to them. They always feel like they have something to prove, and I really don't hang out with them. I don't have anything to prove to them.

Tevin had a similar thought about his peer group:

A few kids felt more like brothers than friends. I can talk to them about anything, just like with the staff, I can talk to any of them about anything I needed. It was always a fun time, we would joke and just have a good time while hooping or waiting for the next game. Even the people that is not in my friend group, would complement my game. It was just a good time.

He shared this while laughing as he recalled some of his fondest moments with friends at Woodland. Norris also talked about his peer group at Woodland when he stated,

When I first started going, it was me, my little brother, and one close friend that I would go with all the time. I wanted to see what they did there because they went a lot. Like every day, they would be up there. Now, I go with my little brother, and we play basketball a lot there. Since I have been going there, I have gained some more friends that I talk to outside of the rec. It's like going there added to my family.

Bart started thinking about his bonds when asked how he felt when he first met his peers in school and how they began to form. He shared,

At first, it made me not want to go to school since I didn't know anyone. But later on, I started getting to know more people, and they saw I was not who they thought I was from social media. When they got to know me, they started rocking with me, and I became cool with some of them.

One thing that remained true throughout the anecdotes from the participants was that forming bonds with people in the community, whether that be school or the recreation center, plays a part in whether they feel like they belong in that space. This adds to the connectedness of the individual to the community itself.

Sharing Experiences

In addition to forming bonds with peers, the participants talked about how sharing experiences with people in a particular space helps to build a stronger sense of belonging to said people. This action will increase the sense of belonging when individuals are present and can occur with peer groups in schools or recreation centers. Experiencing things with like-minded people gives you something to share, something in common with the individual. Nathan felt like learning new things with people helped provide you with something in common with them. Nathan said this about learning new things with people: “If you experience things with other people, it adds another thing you have in common with them. Therefore, it helps you know them better.” In Nathan’s view, this shared lived experience of being together helps increase the sense of belonging among all the teenagers involved.

Elijah thought about it from a sports aspect and shared experiences with basketball at the recreation center.

I connect with them all. I have practice on Tuesdays. We all play on the team together.

When we play in the little league thing we have been through a lot together. We would celebrate after every win at the center.

Bart smiled when he recounted some of his fondest memories with his peers at the recreation center, saying,

My friends being there is the icing on the cake. They made going there better. I remember this one time when we were playing basketball during teen night against campus hills. At the end of the fourth quarter, in the final seconds, I missed the game-winning shot. They still mess with me about it today.

Norris shared his thoughts about his friend group at school. He commented, I related well with my friend group because it was the way—well, our personalities meshed well. We would make jokes about stuff we had been through. This is the only way we could relate with each other since we did not all grow up the same way.

Norris said he related well with his peers because they had similar experiences. Sharing those experiences and making jokes about them helps them get to know each other better, increasing trust with those individuals.

The participants talked about shared experiences with other people, which helped build stronger relationships with them. This can occur through living these experiences with others or just recollecting things that occurred, and the outcome is a stronger relationship with the people around you. These stronger relationships helped them increase their sense of belonging in that space.

Providing Mutual Support

Support plays a role in building a sense of belonging. According to the responses, having a group that supports you helps you feel more connected to the people around you. When sharing their responses about supporting one another, the teens talked about being supported in school by their peers and in recreation centers by the people who come. Support can and does look different for various individuals. Norris thought about how his peer group supported him during a discipline issue at school.

So I was in the hallway, just walking to class. Now, you know, I'm pretty chill, right? So this one, the white student shoulder bumped me like this to me. I let it slide, didn't say nothing, I just looked at him and kept walking. Later on, he gone tell one of the assistant principals that I tried to start a fight with him. They were going to give me ISS until one

of my friends and some of his friends, too, went to them and told them I didn't do anything.

Norris made the motion with his shoulder to show how the student bumped his shoulder in the hallway. He felt supported by people inside and outside of his peer group.

Bart talked about a supportive friend at school. He mentioned,

Most of my friends didn't go to Hawley [High School]. Mostly, the people that were there were associates. Other people were fascinated with my lifestyle. Theo was my only friend that went to my school. Everyone looked at me like a "who is he" type of vibe.

They had one perception of me portrayed on social media, and the perception of me from meeting me was always different. Theo took up for me when they would talk about me.

All three teens shared different ways they felt supported in school. Support can come from either peers inside or outside of their peer group.

Landon thought about a time when he felt supported by some of his peers from the recreation center.

I love going to Woodland [Recreation Center]. All the teens there, we just get along.

Even when a new person comes on Friday, we just try to teach them the system. Tell them where to sign up to play a game and to hold the balls. I can help the new people out since I'm a regular.

Landon tried to remain calm but felt pride when saying, "I am a regular." I asked him what that meant, and while trying to hold back from smiling, he shared, "People that have been going to the center for a while are considered regulars."

As noted by previous statements, feelings of belonging can originate from external factors. Same-aged peers play a large part in this process. Some experiences that the teens spoke

about, as they relate to peer groups, were negative; the majority, however, felt their peer groups positively influenced them. The central themes of forming bonds, sharing experiences, and providing mutual support are integral in increasing a teen's sense of belonging when they can find these from their peers.

Theme 5

Participants recommended ways schools and recreation centers can increase youths' sense of belonging in those spaces. For schools, they recommended fair discipline practices, building relationships with students, and having more cultural events. For recreation centers, they recommended more community events and activities.

The participants were comfortable sharing their thoughts about recreation centers and schools and ways to increase their sense of belonging in both spaces. Throughout the interviews, four key recommendations emerged. Three were for schools, and one was for recreation centers. The recommendations for schools were to practice fair discipline, build relationships with teens, and have more cultural events. The recommendation for recreation centers was to have more community events.

Schools

The first recommendation that arose was the need for fair discipline procedures. During the interview, Norris said his recommendation would be to

Enforce the dress code for all races. I felt like I was equal because I am a guy, so it is pretty much the same for me. But some of the white girls would wear certain stuff that the Black girls could not. They made the Black girls change, but the white girls got away with more. That's not fair.

He vehemently stated the last part. Norris discussed this situation several times during the interview and returned to it during the recommendations section. This recommendation spoke about inequalities with discipline and his view of the staff's perceptions and treatment of white students being different from those of their Black peers. Landon shared a view about the tone of teachers.

Change the attitude of the teachers. Tell them to watch their tone and how they speak to kids. They need to get to know me more. Their tone and the fact that they don't know me, makes kids feel unwelcomed and not want to be there. Everything any kid does is always viewed as a bad thing.

His perception is that they do not care about the students as much as they should and do not know him as a person before making judgments about him. Nathan said that he wanted "Schools to give me the same consequence they would give anyone else."

The second recommendation the participants made for schools was to build better relationships with students. Landon touched on that also when he talked about teachers not knowing him. Reed shared some ideas to increase girls' self-esteem and feelings of belonging at school.

Whenever I come to school, I see young ladies go straight in the bathroom to fix their hair or do whatever. It would be nice if we could have some positive affirmations in the bathrooms, like on mirrors. Don't have to be nothing big, just maybe I am confident, or I am strong. This will help make people want to come more if they felt like they care about them. Let them know they belong in school.

I asked why he thought they felt the need to fix themselves continuously. He simply shared, "They know people will scold them if they don't and if they come out looking busted." Scold is a

local colloquialism, meaning other students will say mean things to them about their appearance if they do not look a certain way. Bart calmly stated his recommendation to “Find roles for everyone. Get to know me before thinking, you know.”

The third recommendation participants made for schools was to have more events for various cultures represented in the school. Tevin shared, “Make sure you have events with different cultures. This is so I know what everyone believes in.” He shared that there was a cultural night at his school that he truly enjoyed, and he loved learning about the various cultures of his classmates. Elijah thought about a program that he wanted to expand. “At my last school, they had this bakery thing. I learned how to bake and make food from other countries.”

Recreation Centers

I asked the participants about their recommendations for recreation centers. The answers for this topic were less robust than people had for schools. Most participants shared that they enjoyed the recreation center and had nothing to change, but some of the teens offered suggestions. These recommendations centered more around increasing programming and community events so that more people could enjoy the recreation center as they do. Ansel said the recreation center should “Have a cookout for the whole neighborhood. We need to get more people in here. It’s great.”

Landon also thought about ways to get more people in the center. He said, “They need to provide transportation to get people here. In addition, they need to have movie screening nights.” Bart shared that the recreation center needed more to engage the community: “Add more community events like community barbecues, more resources, and activities. Woodland needs to utilize Jacobson Park more and have some more events there.” Nathan had similar thoughts about activities. “Take the teens out to different experiences to experience the real world. More

field trips and outside activities.” Reed shared that “the recreation center needs more community family gatherings outside.” Tevin had a similar answer: “The rec needs a multicultural night.

Learning about other cultures that’s around the area.”

Bart expressed a need to bring a program he was used to in Chicago and other programs to the recreation center.

When I was in Chicago, there is this program called Build Chicago. Pretty much the same thing as the rec center, not saying the rec does not do a good job to open doors, but the program allows you to build community with the same life path you are going to. It helps with career paths, too.

Bart thought that recreation centers should do more to build communities. He shared more thoughts about how the recreation center should be more active in the community.

If the rec center start going towards more street prevention, it will connect more with the community. Offering more than just basketball but offer more branches. Some may come for a daycare, some may come to mentor or advise teens. Doing more to stimulate their mind and have more leagues throughout the year with more tournaments. Rec centers need to act like pillars to the community and be the foundation in the community.

Many of the teens’ recommendations for the recreation centers involved adding additional programming or events. The teens wanted to build on what the recreation centers did well and expand on that.

The participants gave recommendations during the interview to help increase their sense of belonging in schools and recreation centers. The recommendations for schools were to have fair discipline practices, build more relationships with students, and have more events that celebrate various cultures. The recommendation for recreation centers is to have more

community events and activities. In summary, the participants desired increased equality, stronger connections with supportive adults, and greater exposure to diverse cultural experiences. This would help them build relationships and have a stronger sense of connectedness to their community.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I presented findings from the teens who participated in the interviews. After analyzing the responses of the teens, five themes emerged. For each theme, I provided first-hand accounts from participants that supported that theme. In the next chapter, I will expand on recommendations and compare the research completed in this study with existing research.

CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Belonging is a natural human feeling. Love and belonging occupy the third tier from the bottom of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. This need is vital for human beings to be able to feel connected. With this being true, it is essential for teens to feel like they belong in schools and other places in the community, such as recreation centers. In my qualitative study, I aimed to determine what attributes Black teens find that increase or hinder a sense of belonging in schools and recreation centers. I also asked my participants to recommend what is needed to increase a sense of belonging in those places. Many factors, including school discrimination (Hussain & Jones, 2021) and police attention in the community (Brunson & Weitzer, 2009; Kelly Pryer & Outley, 2014), have hindered a sense of belonging in schools and the community for Black males. This lower sense of belonging decreases self-esteem and self-worth (Anderson, 2016; Grace, 2020). The theoretical framework I used for this study was critical race theory (CRT), specifically the tenet of counter-storytelling. Counter-storytelling encourages African American males to share their own stories about their experiences concerning popular stereotypes imposed on them. During the interviews, I prompted the participants to share stories about their experiences of belonging at school and recreation centers.

In this chapter, I answer the research questions with my findings and then analyze them by connecting them to existing research regarding Black teen males' sense of belonging in schools and recreation centers. After discussing the implications of my study and providing recommendations for practitioners and researchers, I close this chapter by discussing how performing this study aided my maturation as a school and recreation center professional.

Analysis

My first research question for the study was: *What are Black male teenagers' experiences with and perceptions of their feelings of belonging in schools and recreation centers?* The participants in the study answered this question by sharing what created a sense of belonging for them in schools and recreation centers. In my first finding, **participants had different definitions for belonging and what it felt like to them, but some common elements were expressed.** Norris shared that belonging meant “People not mumbling under their breath or looking at you a certain way.” Meanwhile, Tevin felt that people looking to him as a role model meant he belonged. The main thing that participants discussed was that belonging was related to how other people made them feel. When they felt heard and had a voice in that space, they had an increased sense of belonging. Their sense of belonging decreased when they felt disconnected from a space. This finding aligns well with a study by Hussain and Jones (2021), who described a sense of belonging as connectedness or integration into one’s community.

The second finding from the interviews was that **most participants felt an increased sense of belonging in recreation centers compared to their schools.** Some of the reasons that hindered their sense of belonging in schools were discipline procedures and how adults (and other students) perceived them. Previous studies like Young et al. (2018) found that Black students are more likely to be referred for disciplinary issues than their white classmates. Similarly, many participants in my study discussed unfair discipline procedures that garnered longer suspensions and more unfavorable interactions with school staff. During the interview, Nathan shared, “... they were suspending me from school for 10 days for puffing a vape on school property. It was a white boy out there with me, and he got nothing or searched, and he was smoking too.” The participants’ lack of belonging in schools led most to not participate in

extracurricular activities. This point connects to research by Booker (2006), who found that participation and motivation are two leading indicators of belonging. Students need to feel like they belong to increase learning, motivation, and engagement. Of the eight teens interviewed, only three participated in extracurricular activities other than athletics. This is concerning since studies like Boston and Warren (2017) showed that a lower sense of belonging can hinder student achievement.

It is important to note that everyone in a school has a role in ensuring Black male students feel like they belong. Brooms (2019a) concluded that teachers play a monumental role in fostering that sense of connection. Participants reported that relationships with teachers and the overall motivation they received from the school played a role in their overall sense of belonging. One of the participants, Landon, felt particularly strongly about his school's teachers not supporting and motivating him. Throughout the interview, Landon shared that the teachers were there to get a paycheck and did not have the student's best interests at heart. Grace (2020) found that such teacher behaviors lead to students not feeling welcome and believing teachers made blatant attempts to push them out.

Conversely, every participant felt an increased sense of belonging in recreation centers over schools. The participants reported experiencing a positive vibe when they visited the recreation center that they most often frequented. Many shared that it felt like a "family" at the recreation center. Norris shared, "Feels like a family. With the people that go there on Fridays ..." Comradery with other teens and the relationship that staff helped staff increase the participants' sense of belonging at recreation centers. Studies like Bean et al. (2021) have shown that youth with experience in recreational activities are more likely to have their basic needs met, including the need to feel connected to others.

The third finding that emerged from my research was that **in recreation centers, most participants encountered fewer issues with traditional negative stereotypes that typically plague Black males. These stereotypes hindered the participants' sense of belonging in school.** Throughout the interviews, most participants recalled at least one instance when they felt others saw them through a traditional stereotype that adversely affected Black males. Some examples during the interview were that participants said they were described or treated as violent, loud, or angry. In addition, Ansel recounted that he felt people just saw him as a “tall guy” who would do something wrong. He commented, “Everywhere I go, I see a police officer or staff. It’s like they always think I am going to do something bad or wrong.” That deeply upset him and decreased his sense of belonging in school. Landon shared that teachers would act as if they already knew he was “in trouble” and would not give him the same support they shared with other students. The findings from my study are similar to those in Smith and Hope (2020), in which Black male students discussed stereotypes placed on them, with labels such as violent. During the interview, Bart shared when a teacher blatantly told him, “I am surprised you made it this far.” This type of negative mindset aligns with research from Carey (2019), who found that educators and service providers have had issues ensuring the academic success of Black male students due to the stereotypical images of them as unintelligent and delinquent. Stereotypes like these do not help students increase their motivation to increase participation, which decreases their sense of belonging.

None of the teens interviewed felt that anyone ever applied traditional negative stereotypes to them at the recreation centers. If anything, they thought that the staff truly cared about them and their well-being. Tevin said they see him as “a Black male trying to make it, and they help me get to the next level.” Boston and Warren (2017) found that supportive places

greatly enhance individuals' feelings of connection to their racial identity. According to Tevin and other participants, the recreation center creates spaces where teens can be themselves. In addition, the recreation center staff builds lasting relationships with the participants who want to come back to play basketball or participate in other recreational programming.

The fourth finding concerning my first research question was that **participants reported that peer relationships play a significant role in forming bonds, sharing experiences, and providing mutual support in recreation centers and schools. Improved relationships in peer groups increased their sense of belonging.** All participants shared that they had a group of peers with whom they spent most of their time in school. The participants reported that there are friends they are closer with (their inner circle), and some they are cordial with in school but would not necessarily call them friends. According to Drolet and Arcand (2013), teenagers and their peer groups are integral to whether students feel they belong. Participants who were more social and went to smaller schools had a higher sense of belonging than those who went to larger high schools and were more introverted. While not all the teens at the recreation center attended the same schools as the participants in the study, they felt a strong connection with other teens from the recreation center. Tevin added, "A few kids felt more like brothers than friends. I can talk to them about anything, just like with the staff, I can talk to any of them about anything I needed." The word "family" came up a few times when individuals were talking about people in the recreation center and the "vibe" of the recreation center.

My secondary research question was: *What recommendations do Black males have for improving their sense of belonging?* The finding that answered this research question was that **the participants provided recommendations for schools that included fair discipline practices, building relationships with teens, and having more cultural events, and**

recommendations for recreation centers that included more community events and activities. During the interview, Norris remembered how Black females had more instances of dress code violations than their white counterparts. The participants wanted to feel a high sense of belonging in school, but interactions with others and discipline hindered that sense of belonging. Norris said, “They made the Black girls change, but the white girls got away with more. That’s not fair.” Norris’s concern connects with research by Rogers (2022), who explained how schools promote a mindset of whiteness and a racial hierarchy through dress code violations. When giving recommendations, Landon suggested that teachers work harder for all students. This thought complemented Brooms (2019a), who found that individuals identified belonging through school culture and interaction with teachers as critical for their academic success.

The participants believed organizing more community events at recreation centers would enhance their sense of belonging. Kelly Pryor and Outley (2014) demonstrated how, historically, recreation centers were spaces where the community could come together, which provided a service to enhance the community. Concerning the recreation center, the teens expressed a need for more individuals to come to the recreation center and use community events to have more people experience the sense of belonging they have experienced in that space. This would also serve as a service to the community to bring togetherness to all.

Implications

Participants provided helpful information about what increased their sense of belonging in schools and the community. Seeing how much the conversation affected some participants showed how important it is for kids to have spaces where they can be themselves in both schools and recreation centers. Listening to the participants give such poignant and thoughtful responses

warmed my heart and made me incredibly proud of them. Integrating their responses with the literature from Chapter II brought their feelings to life, mainly as it echoed some of the themes discussed in the previous research. However, some things from the interviews made me consider other ways to view belonging that differed from the existing research. For example, none of the existing studies I reviewed in Chapter II spoke about how personality plays a part in how a participant thinks and feels about belonging in a space.

This section reviews some of the implications of my study's findings.

Feelings of Belonging are Relative to Personal Experience

What makes a person feel like they belong feels different between individuals. Each participant had a different definition of what belonging meant to them. The one common thing is that belonging was contingent on how others viewed or perceived them. Belonging was also fostered by the interaction the participants had with other people. In no instance was belonging a solitary issue or could be attained without the help of external factors. However, internal factors played a part as well. A person may have an easier time finding a sense of belonging based on their character traits than others.

As I listened to the responses, it became evident that a person's personality plays a part in how easily someone can have an increased sense of belonging in a space. When looking at two participants on opposite ends of the personality spectrum, they internalized belonging in vastly different ways. Tevin is a social butterfly. He does not fear going up to someone and starting a conversation with them. Nathan is very introverted. He will speak to you if he knows you but will not first initiate conversation or even bring extra attention to himself if he is in a crowd. It is easier for Tevin to have an increased sense of belonging in most places because that is his personality. Conversely, Nathan will have different results in the same settings since he will wait

until someone converses with him first. If that never happens, he will not succeed in belonging in that space. Thinking about this made me look deeper into other research that has looked at the topic of belonging and personality traits.

Swickert et al. (2002) looked at belonging as it relates to the differences between introverts and extroverts. In this quantitative study, the researchers found that extroverted people have a higher sense of belonging and lower stress levels based on the Interpersonal Support Evaluation List (ISEL) scale. This was also evident in the definition of belonging that the participants gave, where Tevin said that belonging to him was being seen as a role model by others. To Nathan, belonging was getting along with others. Tevin's definition of belonging was more around how others see him. To be a role model to someone, you must speak to them and be a person they feel they can trust. You aim to be a person others can emulate and aspire to become. Nathan's definition of belonging fits his personality more closely, where he merely wants to get along with everyone. He wants to experience a sense of harmony and be able to fade away in the background. He does not want the attention and spotlight like Tevin does. Tevin and Nathan would be two examples of personality extremes, but their responses show how personality affects someone's sense of belonging.

School Size Is Important

I selected the study participants because they regularly attended recreation centers. The only stipulation with the school was that they attend a high school in Campbell. The eight participants represented five local high schools. Four of the five high schools were large, comprehensive high schools, and one was a smaller, early-college high school on a college campus.

The students who attended the smaller high school had fewer discipline incidents and felt a higher sense of belonging. Tevin and Bart both went to Hawley High School. They both had fewer negative things to say about their high school experiences. Tevin discussed having fun learning about other cultures at a cultural night at high school. He did not say anything negative about high school. Bart did have some unfavorable experiences in high school, but for the most part, his experiences were not as severe as some of the participants who went to larger high schools. Both participated in extracurricular clubs at school. Tevin was in the African Club, and Bart was in the chess club. This would align with Booker (2006), who discussed how participation in extracurricular activities increased the sense of belonging in schools.

Landon attended two larger high schools: Sacajawea and Jacobson. Landon had the most challenging time in high school, not even finishing high school. This was due to discipline referrals that he received at both schools, which garnered him a negative reputation. Landon felt that reputation created extra attention from school administrators and teachers. Even when he tried to “do right” and not live up to that reputation, his past caught up with him, and teachers did not make him feel welcome by not helping him and reminding him of said past. Even though Tevin and Bart did not have the same troubled past in school, Tevin mostly spoke about teachers supporting him. Bart did have an instance when the teacher was surprised about his progress, and after he transferred from that class, he did not have any other rejecting interactions with teachers.

Ansel, Nathan, and Norris all attend(ed) Hawkins High School. I found it intriguing that, based on my personal knowledge of the participants, they wouldn't typically be labeled as “troublemakers” from my perspective. Nathan and Norris were each suspended only once, but that one suspension resonated with them, and in each instance, they felt the punishment did not match the incident. In each of their various suspension stories, a white student was doing similar

things but did not get the same (or any) punishment for their behaviors. Ansel shared that he felt like a target because he was Black and tall and always saw a police officer around who was watching him wherever he went.

Elijah and Reed attended Eastern High School. Both participants shared some negative thoughts about their school. Elijah shared that he felt he was looked upon as a troublemaker by some of his peers and did not like to go to school. Reed had similar experiences to Landon. He shared that some of the teachers are not there for the best interest of students but mainly just to get a paycheck. At the larger school, Reed felt that he was not a person, merely only a number or a letter grade.

This phenomenon of having a decreased feeling of belonging in larger schools is not an isolated issue. Scholars have looked at belonging and, more specifically, school size as it relates to students' sense of belonging. Petrucci et al. (2022) found a correlation between school size and a sense of belonging among students. Other factors, such as having relatable adult and peer relationships, also affect a student's understanding of belonging. I would say that it is easier to build lasting relationships with an increased number of peers and adults in a smaller setting. That way, students can feel that they are more than a number or just a grade and can be a person with a name.

Support Is Always Necessary

Students tend to tolerate school to progress to the next level. Some participants expressed that school was just a means to an end. This attitude toward school does not increase a sense of belonging or make it a place teens want to be. Some participants are experiencing exclusionary discipline policies, negative interactions with others, and a lack of relatable adults at school. These negative feelings towards school were manifested physically through body language and

emotions during the interview. Their words and actions during the interviews demonstrated that school was not a supportive environment for them.

I used the participants' body language and tones to indicate their attitude toward school, which was lackluster compared to the positive attitudes and emotions they shared when talking about the recreation center that they most frequented. When Ansel spoke about how people perceived him at school, he became emotional. For him to gather his thoughts, we paused the interview. During the other interviews, the participants often similarly responded when talking about interactions with adults and peers at school. Landon's mood about school changed negatively compared to his positive body language about the recreation center. The recreation center supported the participants mentally and emotionally and provided for their physical needs.

Previous research has shown how Black males receiving support from the school through peer-to-peer or teacher-to-peer enhances their emotional well-being (Brooms, 2019a). The participants received the type of support that they needed from the recreation center. Several times during the interviews, participants described the relationship at the recreation center as familial. They are fulfilling their basic need for acceptance and connectedness. "Students tend to develop a sense of belongingness in environments they perceive as nurturing and supportive of their social, emotional, and academic needs" (Caton, 2012, p. 1074).

Recommendations

In this section, I share some recommendations for practice and future research.

Recommendations for Practice

Recommendations for Schools

One of the recurring areas of improvement the participants identified was the relationship between teachers and students in the school. Multiple participants reported that teachers are just

there for a paycheck, and administrators see them as troublemakers. To increase the feeling of belonging for Black males, our school personnel need to work on building stronger relationships with students. There could be programs started where each adult in the school has five kids they check in with weekly. During a specific time in their schedule, the students could have the opportunity to have at least one trusted adult they could depend on and meet with. This would increase the students' feelings of belonging. The adult would be their champion. To achieve this on a micro-scale, the school personnel could try and get to know students themselves. Having conversations with students about things that are not school-related is one of the best ways to build relationships with them. They will see that you look at them as more than a student and want to get to know them as human beings. These conversations and relationships will help increase personal relationships with students.

Implementing restorative practice programs in schools could help decrease discipline disparities against African American males. Restorative practices shift the focus from punitive disciplinary measures to guiding students in understanding the harm caused, prompting them to contemplate ways to repair the damage they inflicted on the affected individuals. Whiting and Nyberg (2024) found that restorative practices help Black students receive fewer discipline infractions. Implementing this approach can reduce suspension rates, aid students build stronger relationships within the school community, and facilitate learning from their behavior to prevent them from doing it again.

I agree with study participant Tevin that schools need more cultural events for students. I would expand this to say that schools need to be mindful of the cultures of their student body and be intentional in celebrating each culture. Black students should not only learn about their culture during February. Boston and Warren's (2017) research suggests that having a stronger racial

identity increases a student's sense of belonging. To accomplish this, schools can offer classes on Black history or literature and have more events that celebrate the contributions of Blacks. The school could help instill pride in each student's racial identity, increasing their sense of belonging.

Recommendations for Recreation Centers

The recommendation that became apparent during the interviews was the need for more community-based programming. Community recreational programming is integral in building spaces for youth to grow and thrive (Outley et al., 2011). The participants shared that the recreation center needed more programming to build a sense of unity in the community. Historically, recreation centers were places where the community would congregate. Interestingly, both recreation centers used in this study reside in traditionally Black neighborhoods and once served as venues for community meetings. The participants also shared that the recreation center should offer more programming than basketball. They would like to go on more field trips and experience more things through the recreation center.

Recommendations for Future Research

Scholars such as Dr. Brooms (2015, 2019a, 2019b) and Dr. Grace (2020) have investigated the connection between schools and a sense of belonging among different student groups. Black males are among the most researched minority groups. There is some research on how recreation centers increase a sense of belonging among participants. However, this mainly refers to recreation programming and participation in organized athletics. More research is needed to discuss belonging in recreation centers and schools.

For urban teens who utilize recreation programming, schools, and recreation centers are two places they frequent the most. Schools are compulsory for urban teens until the age of 16,

yet they can choose whether to attend recreation centers. Since students choose to attend recreation centers, schools could try to be more welcoming so students would want to be there more. Since teachers are on the front line and have more interaction with students, generating this feeling of belonging among urban teens would start with them. Some teachers do in fact create classrooms where students feel welcomed and heard. Future research could also focus on teachers who create welcoming spaces and how they create those spaces for their students.

My research attempted to determine what schools can do to help teens feel a stronger sense of belonging so that the teens have a more favorable experience. My study suggests a need for further exploration of recreation centers and schools, comparing these entities to assess similarities and differences. Doing so would allow us to identify elements that contribute to a stronger sense of belonging in one area, intending to replicate those factors in the other. Recreation centers are an entity where there is limited research. Comparing recreation centers to schools, somewhere adolescents must attend, would enhance the literature on belonging.

Final Thoughts

Belonging has interested me ever since I was a classroom teacher. During my master's program at North Carolina Central University, I enjoyed hearing Dr. Terrell Strayhorn speak at our school during our lecture series about his work on belonging. This helped me put a scholarly name on building relationships with students and added a layer of thinking about the type of teacher I wanted to be. My mother was my role model for the kind of teacher I aspired to become. I aimed for students to remember their time in my class for years based on how I treated them. I needed to ensure I could build relationships with every student in my classroom. If a student had an issue with discipline, I made sure that my initial thought was not, "Why won't that kid shut up?" or "What is wrong with them," but "What can I do to build a relationship with

that student?” Building relationships with your students is one of the quickest ways to increase student belonging. I have worked in recreation centers longer than I have been an educator. My time working in recreation centers has helped me learn how to build relationships with students on a deeper level so I could use that in the classroom.

As a teacher and school administrator, I have enjoyed working at all levels, from elementary to high school. I have witnessed a consistent pattern at every level where Black boys face escalated disciplinary consequences and get labeled as troublemakers. I heard other teachers say things like, “Watch out for that class,” or “You have a tough fourth period,” with classes that had an increased number of Black boys. Such comments showed how teachers felt about that group and revealed the negative perceptions of Black students within the school.

The mindset of teachers like these was the motivation for my research. Moving on to administration, I could see how, in schools with predominantly white staff, Black boys would be referred to the office at an alarming rate as compared to their white classmates. The majority of the time, when they were in my office, they would say that another student did one thing or another, and they were the ones that got in trouble. Certainly, they made mistakes, but their missteps were more visible than those of other students, which is why they garnered more attention. I noticed how Black male students receiving this type of unwarranted attention early in elementary school hinders their sense of belonging as they matriculate through their academic careers.

As a recreation center professional, I consider my job to be to ensure that teenagers have fun in a safe environment. The mantra that led my work was that teens could go to any other recreation center in the city to play basketball. Each recreation center in the city has the same amenities. They will come to my center for the relationships I build with them. To do this, I

make it a point to speak to them and learn about them outside of the recreation center and outside of basketball. I ensure that I know them and can talk to them about their everyday lives. Little did I know that these small conversations would make that much of an impact on them. In speaking with the participants during the interview, something as simple as asking a teen how their day was will increase their sense of belonging in that space and help build relationships with them. Consistently getting to know the young men each time you see them, whether daily, weekly, or monthly, helps increase trust, increasing their desire to come to that space. One can replicate this as a teacher to build student trust and relationships.

Teachers, school administrators, and recreation professionals can all use this research to help develop spaces where Black males can find a haven and be themselves. This space also helps keep them out of trouble in the greater community. The findings from my study show that recreation centers create a greater sense of belonging among participants compared to their schools. Some of the reasons found were relationships with other participants and staff, the overall feeling of the center, and building relationships with the participants who attended the center. If schools could reduce unfair discipline practices and create a true sense of “you want me to be here” among students, their feelings of belonging would increase, increasing student social-emotional well-being.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL—INDIVIDUAL

Interview Requirements

- Black male
- 18 years of age (Categorized as a Teenager)
- Frequently attends a recreation center
 - At least 2 times a month
 - Attends or recently attended a local high school

Research Questions

1. What are the experiences and perceptions of Black male teenagers about their feelings of belonging?
 - a. How do Black males experience belonging in recreation centers?
 - b. How do Black males experience belonging in schools?
2. What recommendations do Black males have for improving their feelings of belonging?

A sense of belonging is described by connectedness or integration into your community (Hussain & Jones, 2019). Your community can include places you frequently visit, like your neighborhood, school, or any other entities in the community, such as a recreation center.

Interview and Probing Questions

Introductory Questions

- What does it feel like to belong at school/recreation centers?
 - What does belonging mean to you?
- What is your grade or highest grade completed?

- What high school do or did you attend?
- How would you describe yourself to someone who doesn't know you?

Experiences in Recreation Centers

1. Tell me about the rec center you go to the most.
2. Why do you go there, and what makes you continue to visit?
 - a. What do you do when you go there?
 - i. If you could do those activities in other places, why do you go to that particular place?
 - b. How do folks at the center try to get to know you? Share some experiences that really stick out to you.
3. Tell me about the people at the rec center.
 - a. Staff?
 - b. Friend group?
 - i. Would you continue to go to the center if that set of friends did not go with you?
4. Tell me how much you think you matter to the people at the rec center.
 - a. Other teens
 - b. Staff
5. Talk to me about the overall vibe of the rec center.
 - a. Anything that makes you feel unwelcome?
 - b. Things they do well to make you feel welcomed, connected or valued?
6. Tell me about some of the ways you think staff see you. (stereotypes)
 - a. Why do you think that?

7. Overall, do you feel you belong (connected, valued, or heard) at this rec center?
 - a. Tell me why you feel that way.

Experiences in Schools

1. Are there or were there a lot of kids at your school that look like you racially?
 - a. Tell me how this affected your experience at school.
2. When you think about the positive and negative experiences you may have had at school, what comes to mind? Share some of your most memorable experiences.
 - a. Include
 - i. Activities/Clubs
 - ii. Extracurricular events you have attended
 - iii. Discipline
 - iv. The vibe of the building and staff
3. Talk to me about the people at your school
 - a. How do you relate, or not, to the adults at school?
 - i. Why? or Why not?
 - b. Tell me how you relate to other students.
 - i. Your friend group
 - ii. Kids outside your friend group
4. Do you feel your school is a place where you or other students like to be?
 - a. Please elaborate on your answer and give reasons why you feel that way.
5. Tell me about how much you think you matter to the people at the rec center.
 - a. Other students
 - b. Staff

6. Tell me about some of the ways you think staff see you. (stereotypes)
 - a. Why do you think that?
7. Do you think students get treated differently at school?
 - a. Based on what, what have you seen?
 - b. How does that make you feel?

Recommendations to improve the feeling of Belonging

1. If you were in charge (this was yours), what would you do to help people feel like they belong? (Rec center and school)
 - a. Rec Center
 - b. School
2. What activities would you like to see at the rec center and at school?

Conclusion

1. We are at the end of our interview time. Is there anything you want to share that we haven't already discussed?
 - a. Do you have any questions for me?
 - b. May I call or email you if I need to clarify anything you said or ask additional questions?

As a reminder, you will receive an email with the transcript of our conversation with notes regarding themes that I found during our conversation. This will arrive approximately a few weeks from now. At that point, I will contact you again to see if you have any additional questions or comments about the transcript.

This is the end of our time together. Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. If you have nothing else to share, that concludes this interview, and I will end the recording. I appreciate your time and feedback. If you have additional information or would like to meet with me after the conclusion of this study, feel free to contact me.

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL—FOCUS GROUP

Research Questions

1. What are the experiences and perceptions of Black male teenagers regarding their feelings of belonging?
 - a. How do Black males experience belonging in recreation centers?
 - b. How do Black males experience belonging in schools?
2. What recommendations do Black males have for improving their feelings of belonging?

A sense of belonging is described by connectedness or integration into your community (Hussain & Jones, 2019). Your community can include places you frequently visit, like your neighborhood, school, or any other entities in the community, such as a recreation center.

Interview and Probing Questions

Thank you for coming together to participate in this focus group. It is helpful if everyone responds to each question, and please feel free to have conversations with each other about responses; that makes this a more fruitful experience for everyone. Let's start with some introductions to make sure we all are familiar with each other.

Introductory Questions

1. Please state your name and the school you attended for the group.

By now, you all have had individual interviews and reviewed your transcripts and themes. The goal of this focus group is to come together to talk about your experiences and recommendations to create more welcoming spaces.

Focus Group Questions

1. When you feel you belong, are you more comfortable being yourself?
2. Tell us about a time when you felt you belonged.
 - a. How did that feel?
3. Is a sense of belonging more about mutual respect for you? Acceptance? What other words would you use?
4. Are there places and times at school where you experience these feelings of belonging?
 - a. Anywhere you feel a lack of belonging?
5. Are there places and times at the recreation center where you experience these feelings of belonging?
 - a. Anywhere you feel a lack of belonging?
6. Do you feel emotionally and socially supported at school?
 - a. Why or why not?
7. Do you feel emotionally and socially supported at the rec?
 - a. Why or why not?
8. What processes or policies hinder a sense of belonging at school or the rec center?
9. Have you ever felt left out at school?
 - a. Tell me about that situation.
10. Have you ever felt left out at the rec center?
 - a. Tell me about that situation.

11. You all have stated individual recommendations, and they are (list them for the group). After hearing each other, are there any recommendations you would add to increase a sense of belonging in schools and the community (i.e., recreation centers)?

As a reminder, you will receive an email with the transcript of our conversation with notes regarding themes that I found during our conversation. This will arrive approximately a few weeks from now. At that point, I will contact you again to see if you have any additional questions or comments about the transcript.

This is the end of our time together. Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. If you have nothing else to share, that concludes this interview, and I will end the recording. I appreciate your time and feedback. If you have additional information or would like to meet with me after the conclusion of this study, feel free to contact me.