

GOODLETT, ASHLEY, D., Ed.D. *Voices of Bloomsdale: A Student-Centered and Asset-Based Approach to Understanding the Experiences of Academically Successful African American Middle School Students from an Economically Vulnerable Rural Community.* (2021)

Directed by Dr. Katherine Cumings Mansfield. 151 pp.

This dissertation study explores the experiences of rural African American students from economically vulnerable communities. Building on Terah Venzant Chambers' work on high-achieving students of color, this study aims to understand how successful rural African American students perceive their experiences in school. Specifically, Chambers' Racial Opportunity Cost (ROC) theory is used to view variables that challenge students as well as those that help them reach their goals.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, methods were limited to conducting focus groups via an online platform. Each focus group interview consisted of 14 questions. The questions were asked in order to determine the students' perspectives on factors contributing to their academic success, academic advice to others, and some challenges they encountered for being an African American student in a rural setting.

Contributions include taking an asset-based approach to showcase the successes and challenges of students most often minoritized and viewed with a deficit perspective in schools: African American boys and girls, students from economic vulnerable communities, and folks who grow up in rural settings. This is especially important when considering the continuing gap in educational access for Black children, the ongoing killings of unarmed African Americans, and the subsequent riots throughout this country in support of Black Lives Matter.

Findings from this dissertation study may also potentially assist in the development and/or improvement of teacher education programs, school-based interventions and community programs for African American rural students. Study findings may also help address some of the gaps in the literature regarding academic success among rural African American students.

VOICES OF BLOOMSDALE: A STUDENT-CENTERED AND ASSET-BASED
APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF
ACADEMICALLY SUCCESSFUL AFRICAN AMERICAN
MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS FROM AN
ECONOMICALLY VULNERABLE
RURAL COMMUNITY

by

Ashley D. Goodlett

A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

Greensboro
2021

Approved by

Committee Chair

This dissertation is dedicated to my girls, Anaya and Alaina Goodlett. I hope that you know I did this for you, to be an example of what Black girl magic truly means. You can achieve anything if you put your mind to it.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation written by ASHLEY D. GOODLETT has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair_____

Committee Members_____

_____March 17,2021_____

Date of Acceptance by Committee

_____March 17, 2021_____

Date of Final Oral Examination

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to thank God. My faith truly assisted me through this process. I would also like to thank my mom and dad. Without them this process would have been very difficult. Thank you for going over and beyond to ensure my success. To my Daisy, Elaine Fennell, I love you so much and appreciate all your prayers and encouragement through this process. When I wanted to quit you kept me focused to the finish line. I love you! To my dad, John Fennell, thank you for your support. You may be a man of few words, but you always have my back. I made it and didn't let anyone else dictate my future! I also would like to thank my husband, William Goodlett Jr., for his support and for attempting to play both roles while I worked countless nights this past year. Your support is very much appreciated.

Thank you to my dissertation chair, Dr. Kat (Katherine Cumings Mansfield) for your time, dedication, expertise, and support throughout this process. I will forever be grateful for your guidance. To the members of my dissertation committee, Dr. Kathryn Hytten and Dr. Brian Clarida, thank you for your feedback, guidance, and support.

And last but not least, thank you to all the students who participated in this study. Thank you for allowing me to use your voices.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES	viii
LIST OF FIGURES	ix
 CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
Statement of Problem.....	2
Purpose of Study	3
Research Questions	4
Background Context	4
Racial Injustices and Police Brutality	5
Rural Education	8
High-Achieving Students of Color	9
Economically Vulnerable Students	10
Overview of Methods	11
Theoretical Framework	12
Racial Opportunity Cost Theory	12
Positionality	14
Significance of Study	16
Summary of Chapters	17
II. LITERATURE REVIEW	19
Where Do African American Students Learn the Best	20
Principal Influence on Schools	22
Teacher Influence on Schools	24
School Environment.....	26
What Defines a Student as High-Achieving?	28
Characteristics of High-Achievers and Gifted Students	29
Underrepresentation of High-Achieving Students of Color	31
Schooling Experiences of High-Achieving Students of Color	32
Struggles to Being High-Achieving.....	33
Racial Opportunity Cost and School Experiences	35
Research on Schooling Experiences in Rural Communities.....	37
Rural Education	38
School Experiences	39
Research on the Schooling Experiences of Historically Racialized Students.....	41

Deficit-Based Responses to Perceived Achievement Problems	43
Student Blame	43
Resilience	44
Asset-Based Responses to Perceived Achievement Problems	45
Parental Support	46
School Culture	47
Student-Teacher Relationships	48
Research That Centers the Voices of Students	49
Importance of Student Voice	49
Summary	50
 III. METHODS	 52
Pilot Field Work	53
Methodology	57
Research Questions	57
Setting	58
Research Participants	59
Data Collection	61
Data Storage and Anatomization	61
Data Analysis	62
Trustworthiness/Ethical Considerations	63
(De)Limitations	66
 IV. FINDINGS	 68
Brief Overview of Key Ideas	69
Focus Group Interview Composition	71
Analytical Themes	73
Theme 1: The African American middle school students from the study have to navigate added stressors to maintain academic success	73
Psychosocial Costs	75
Representation Costs	76
Theme 2: Most participants in this study have had to negotiate a complex and multi-faceted racial identity	79
Theme 3: All participants in this study are both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated to be academically successful	83
Intrinsic Motivation	84
Extrinsic Motivation	86

Theme 4: All participants in the study have parents that play an active role in their education.....	89
Summary of Findings.....	94
V. Discussion, Implications and Conclusions	95
Discussion of Research Questions	97
How do African American students from an economically vulnerable rural community define success?	97
What do African American students from an economically vulnerable rural community perceive as contributing factors toward their academic success?	99
Role of Parents	99
Instructional Strategies.....	100
Teacher-Student Relationships	102
Peer Influences.....	103
What do African American students from an economically vulnerable rural community perceive as challenges to their academic success?.....	104
What advice do African American students from an economically vulnerable rural community have for their peers, educators, and family?	105
Peer Advice	105
Educators Advice	106
Family Advice.....	106
Implications.....	107
Missed Opportunities on Racism	109
Racial Opportunity Cost Model Revisited.....	110
Representation Costs.....	111
School Factors.....	112
Recommendations for Further Research.....	116
Final Thoughts	117
REFERENCES	121
APPENDIX A. FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS PROTOCOL	143
APPENDIX B. PARENTAL CONSENT FORM	145
APPENDIX C. STUDENT ASSENT FORM	149
APPENDIX D. RECRUITMENT LETTER.....	151

LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 1. Summary of Pilot Study Student Responses to Focus Group Interview Questions	56
Table 2. Bloomsdale Middle School Student 2018-19 Reading EOG Proficiency Scores	59
Table 3. Demographics of Participants	60
Table 4. Focus Group Dynamics	72

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1. Racial Opportunity Cost Model (Tabron & Chambers, 2019).....	36
Figure 2. Excerpt From Reflexivity Journal	64
Figure 3. Bulletin Board Promoting Diversity.....	114
Figure 4. Katherine Johnson Door Display.....	115

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This research study is focused on the perceptions of academically successful students in Bloomsdale¹, a small rural town nestled along a river in the Southeastern United States. Established in 1730, Bloomsdale was known for its large flower plantation managed by the labor of enslaved people. This plantation was so large it was often referred to as “The Castle.” After slavery, Bloomsdale continued to be a farming town and still is to this day. Until the advent of World War II, Bloomsdale was one of the largest fresh cut flower producers. Today, Bloomsdale is an easy pass-through rural town. As you enter the town, you are greeted by a historical marker highlighting where one of the first drawbridges in the state stood. Remnants of the bridge still rise out of the water. Locals now use it as a fishing pier. As you drive down the streets of Bloomsdale, it becomes quite apparent that you are in an impoverished area. The active rail line that runs through the town is lined with rundown houses that are still occupied. Most roads are in desperate need of repair. Single wide trailer parks and small single-family homes make up the majority of the housing options in the town. A recent hurricane left behind several abandoned buildings that line the main street. There is only one small locally owned grocery store in town and one bank that is housed in a double wide trailer. Ten years ago, the Bloomsdale elementary and middle school complex was constructed.

¹ All names of places and people are pseudonyms.

Since their construction, the schools have been the highlight of the town due to their modern structure and well-manicured landscape. According to state statistical records, the majority of Bloomsdale's population is considered low income, with a mean salary of \$27,583. Most of Bloomsdale's residents work on farms, in construction, or for the local factory on the river. Although most of the residents are impoverished, based on recent data, those most likely to be economically challenged are African Americans, with incomes 42.19% below the poverty level. An interview with a 40-year resident of Bloomsdale revealed that the recent construction and growth of a nearby city has attracted a large portion of Bloomsdale's African Americans. Several of them have left Bloomsdale seeking better jobs and housing.

Statement of Problem

The so-called academic achievement gap has been a focus of national attention for decades (Noguera, 2003). The research literature is replete with studies that point out the bleak educational statistics of African American students when compared with white students (Noguera, 2003). Often, research positions the problem of poor achievement squarely on the students rather than on systemic racism and the consequent opportunity gaps that are directly related to the academic success of students (Tabron & Chambers, 2019). For example, research shows that biased (implicit or explicit) educators are responsible for placing African American students in vocational and low-level educational tracks for core subjects (Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Mansfield, 2015; 2016). It has been demonstrated throughout schools that many African American students receive a simplified curriculum with lower academic goals and less rigorous assignments. They

also have less experienced teachers that are either new to teaching or teaching outside their field (Cholewa et al., 2012). Researchers are rightfully pointing out that something must be done to raise academic achievement expectations for our African American students. However, until relatively recently, the problem of low achievement has been focused mostly on boys (Patton et al., 2016), and framed as a student problem rather than a system problem (Tabron & Chambers, 2019). Moreover, there is a disturbing lack of research that presents the lived experiences of academically successful African American students (Tabron & Chambers, 2019). In addition, the slim research that does focus on gifted students of color is conducted in urban and suburban communities (Ford, 1996; Ford et al., 2000; Morris, 2002; Tatum, 1997).

This qualitative research study is motivated by my experiences working with students of color (mostly Latino and African American) in rural areas of the Southeastern United States. While the overwhelming number of Bloomsdale's African American students are economically and academically vulnerable, there are academically successful students. My research aims to learn from students who may be economically vulnerable but are academically successful.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to understand how academically successful African American middle school students from an economically vulnerable rural community perceive their schooling experiences. This work assists in understanding the variables that challenge students as well as help them reach their academic goals. I wanted to hear from the students and provide them with a platform to speak on their own lived experiences in

middle school. This study also aimed to take an asset-based approach/perspective on the topic of African American students' academic success. My hope is that this research study will provide insights to school and district level leaders to initiate change. This information can be used to aid in recommendations for both policy and practice that can potentially improve the schooling experiences of students of color in economically-vulnerable, rural communities.

Research Questions

The following question and sub questions provided a guide for this research study.

1. How do academically successful African American students from an economically vulnerable rural community perceive their schooling experiences?
 - a. How do they define success?
 - b. What do they perceive as contributing factors toward their academic success?
 - c. What do they perceive as challenges to their academic success?
 - d. What advice do these students have for peers, educators, and family?

Background Context

In Chapter Two of this dissertation, I provide a comprehensive review of the literature. However, for the purposes of this introductory chapter, I will share basic highlights from three of the most important topics to this study: general research on students in rural schools, knowledge around the schooling experiences of high-achieving

students of color, an overview of research on economically vulnerable students' educational experiences. But first, I situate this study around issues affecting African Americans, such as racial injustices and police brutality.

Racial Injustices and Police Brutality

We are far from 1964 when the Civil Rights Act was signed into law, which prohibited discrimination in public places, provided for the integration of public schools, and facilities, and made employment discrimination based on race illegal (Schwartz, 2020); yet here we are 56 years later in the midst of a new civil rights movement. Today the media is filled with images of civil rights demonstrations and videos of White policemen murdering Black men and women for no reason except they can. To further worsen the situation, President Donald Trump threatened to use the military against American citizens (Schwartz, 2020). In this section, I situate this study in the current milieu, discussing recent police killings and racial injustice. I also discuss what educators can do to assist in educating students of color on racism that they may face in and out of school to set the stage for the chapters that follow.

Through social media and video recordings, widespread racism and racially biased policing that has gone on for years, but has been ignored by the public at large, has now gained primetime news coverage. Amidst the current Covid-19 pandemic, which caused the creation of stay-at-home orders, the world was home to watch the eight minute and 46 second video showing four policemen in Minneapolis murdering an unarmed Black man, George Floyd, as he lay in the street. Mainstream media sources have rarely given attention to racial violence and police brutality. Therefore, watching the George

Floyd event on television was so emotionally powerful that people of all races from all over the world flocked to the streets, despite the risk of contracting Covid-19 to stand for justice (Schwartz, 2020). I believe these protests are not just due to George Floyd, but the result of built-up resentment of the mistreatment of Black people in this country by police.

For example, Eric Garner in New York City, Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and Walter Scott in North Charleston, South Carolina, and so many more Black men, have been killed by police (Graham, A., Haner, M., Sloan, M., Cullen, F., Kulig, T., & Jonson, C., 2020). Moreover, prominence and social status does not create immunity from excessive force by police if you are a Black person. This was seen by the arrests of tennis star James Blake, who was misidentified as a suspect and Harvard University professor Henry Louis Gates, who was mistaken as a burglar, as both men were subjected to the use of excessive force and arrest by police, most likely due to their race (Graham et al., 2020; Mueller et al., 2015; Valencia, 2010).

Our Black women are not exempt from these racially biased police practices either. For example, in 2015, Sandra Bland gained media attention when a dash cam video caught her being verbally and physically abused by a police officer during a traffic stop (Ritchie, 2017). She later died in custody. Breiaon King, an elementary school teacher, was also brutalized by police. The incidents of her case were also caught on dash cam. She was repeatedly slammed to the ground and on the hood of the police car by officers after being stopped for speeding (Ritchie, 2017). The officers justified their behavior by saying that they thought Breiaon had a weapon, which she did not, and

claimed that she had an uncooperative attitude. One of the officers later admitted to being fearful of Black people because of their violent tendencies (Ritchie, 2017).

People are beyond fed up with social injustice and police killings. I have been one of those Americans that has remained silent when it came to talking about racial issues or social injustice, however that ends today. No justice, no peace! How can I remain silent when I see what this country has become, better yet, what this country has always been. The United States has a serious problem that has gone too long unresolved. And America's race problem plays out in America's schools.

As an African American female and educator, I am obligated to advise other educators of the need to prepare students of color. The individual that recorded George Floyd being killed was a 17-year-old high school student. When she returns to school, she needs educators that can help support and feel comfortable discussing race issues in America. Silence in schools around the racism that our Black and Brown students may face is doing students a disservice: We must speak on these uncomfortable topics. In an article written by Germán (2019), she poses to educators the need to integrate different races into their classroom and intentionally discuss race. She argues:

Not discussing the subtleties of issues of race and racism in the classroom is irresponsible. If we are preparing our students to engage with other humans in empathic and respectful ways, then we must do our part to address racism. If we are preparing young people to build a future that doesn't yet exist, then we must explain the need to dismantle racism. If we are supporting our young people as they seek to change the world-because they can, because it's doable- then we must play our role well and imagine that future with them. (p.16)

Students have to be taught how to navigate racism they may experience within the school building as well, not just outside of school. My hope is that by having conversations

about racism and social injustices with other educators, they will begin to recognize implicit biases that they may possess so that they can begin to be rectified.

Rural Education

Current research studies on African American rural education are limited but growing. Research on rural students of color is mainly focused on high school students (Means, 2019), therefore my research will add to a much-needed area of literature. In the United States, 90% of rural African American individuals live in the South (Means, 2019, p.4). Rural students are disadvantaged in many ways when compared to urban and suburban students. Rural students have more financial need, have less access to academically- rigorous courses due to lacking school budgets and personal constraints (Means, 2019, p.2). African American rural students have lower college aspirations and face significant systemic difficulties that interfere with a desire for higher education (Means, 2019). Rural students benefit from having a tight-knit community and their family plays a critical role in supporting their education (Means, 2019). Research shows that out of other Black subgroups, rural Black students typically have a large support system for pursuing education and career aspirations. This support system can consist of parents, grandparents, siblings, extended family, and family friends (Means, 2019, p. 3).

School-level networks, such as teachers, principals, counselors and coaches play an integral role in rural Black students' pursuit of continued education as they progress through their school year after year (Means, 2019). Church and community extracurricular activities are also important parts of Black rural education due to the social support they offer (Means, 2019).

High-Achieving Students of Color

A lot of attention has been focused on low academic performing students of color and how their school environment impacts their outcomes (Tabron & Chambers, 2019).

Low performance of students of color is often attributed to the structure of institutionalized White normed school environments (Tabron & Chambers, 2019).

However, there are several students of color that defy this stereotype and are able to navigate their institution in order to achieve academic success. Researchers have highlighted how teachers, the community, and district school leaders believe enrichment initiatives geared toward the unique needs of African Americans could have a positive influence on their academic performance in schools (Ascher, 1991; Johnson, 1990).

Several school districts have already started trying to tackle the underachievement of African Americans due to the school environment. Some school districts have created schools that focus solely on African American student's needs, and developed a unique curriculum and programs that integrate African American history and culture. For example, after Milwaukee Public Schools intensely reviewed their data on African American male achievement, they concluded that fewer than 20% of their population had a C average or better. This discovery sparked the school system to designate an elementary school and a middle school as African Immersion Schools, making them the first public school district to approve such a plan. One of the schools' initiatives is to highlight the accomplishments and achievements of African American people. For example, the youngest students learn the alphabet by affiliating each letter with the first letter of famous African Americans' names (Leake & Leake, 1992).

Researchers contribute these programs' success to their ability to allow students to build a positive self-identity, cultural awareness, cultivate a sense of purpose, develop a healthy balance between individualization and build a sense of belonging. All of these things represent commonalities of successful programs (Bailey & Paisley, 2004).

Researchers also suggest that effective schools for African Americans have:

- (a) a clear sense of purpose, (b) core standards within a rigorous curriculum, (c) high expectations, (d) a commitment to educate all students (e) a safe and orderly learning environment, (f) strong partnerships with parents, and (g) a problem-solving attitude. (Noguera, 2003)

Unfortunately, most African American students are not enrolled in these effective schools that provide high-quality instruction.

Economically Vulnerable Students

Often economically vulnerable students are faced with many challenges when it comes to being academically successful due to many factors such as, teachers' implicit biases, poor training, and lack of experience. Research has also found that many teachers believe that economically vulnerable children are not able to be successful in school; and thus, rarely challenge them. However, students that come from economically disadvantaged communities are just as capable of learning as students that come from affluent families. For instance, Boykin and Noguera's (2011) research on academic achievement gaps found that:

Too often, attitudes and beliefs that contribute to the normalization of failure are unchallenged, and when failure is normalized, educators often grow comfortable seeing minority students underperform and fail in large numbers. In such schools,

students of color may also grow accustomed to receiving failing grades, and they may actively avoid academic pursuits or challenging courses. (p.33)

To prevent economically vulnerable students from believing that they are not capable of achieving academic success they must have teachers, principals and a school atmosphere that reflect the belief that they are capable of high achievement.

In a study conducted by Delpit (2012), where several Chicago teachers were observed, it was found that teachers in high performing schools located in economically disadvantaged communities believed that all their students were brilliant and capable of achieving academic success. Their instructional strategies were aligned with this belief which made all their instruction relevant and rigorous. As exclaimed by Pitre (2014): Educators in high performing schools in economically disadvantaged communities are convinced of their student's brilliance, humanity, and inherent intellectual capability. As a result, they set high expectations for performance and support students toward their success. (p. 216)

Overview of Methods

This basic qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) aimed to explore what African American middle school students perceived were factors that contributed to their success. I recruited thirteen African American middle school students in grades 6th, 7th or 8th that were academically successful to participate in focus group interviews. I then conducted four semi-structured focus group interviews with the participants who were assigned to either one of 3 groups of girls or the one group of boys. Each student selected a pseudonym and provided me with a little background information about their current

schooling scenario. Due to the current pandemic, Bloomsdale students have the option to attend school in person or remain remote. Each focus group interview occurred through Zoom and were recorded. Following the focus group interviews, I transcribed the focus group interviews and coded the transcripts. I looked for commonalities and categories in order to develop themes. The methods used for this research study are described in greater detail in Chapter Three of this dissertation.

Theoretical Framework

This qualitative research study is grounded in the racial opportunity cost theory (Chambers, 2011). This theory helped shape the questions I asked during my focus group interviews and guided how I interpreted my findings. In the section to follow I will provide a synopsis of racial opportunity cost theory and explain how it connects to my research study. Huggins, Locke, and Fowler (2014) explain that the racial opportunity cost theory can be used to examine the costs African American students face as a result of school pressure. This theory also assists in highlighting the relationship between students and their environments (p.466).

Racial Opportunity Cost Theory

Racial opportunity cost theory refers to the price that students of color pay in their pursuit of academic success. Schools often highlight dominant White middle-class norms regarding school success and devalue or don't acknowledge the cultural viewpoints of students of color. Racial opportunity cost often occurs when students of color experience some sort of conflict, either internal or external when their pursuit of academic success means moving further away from the norms and values of their community (Chambers &

Huggins, 2014). Researchers Chambers and Huggins tested this theory and determined how these costs played out in the lives of students. They interviewed 18 academically successful students of color at two top notch private colleges. They asked the participants questions about their experiences in high school and college. Chambers and Huggins (2014) used racial opportunity cost as a frame to analyze the data, paying close attention to the ways that school culture either helped or hindered the students' academic success. From their research they made three assertions (Chambers, Huggins, Locke, & Fowler, 2014, p. 466):

1. Race plays a major role in students' experiences.
2. The institutional level which includes climate, engagement, structural and relational factors have the most significant impact on the achievement of students of color.
3. Students of color must master how to navigate institutional level factors in order to achieve academic success.

Identifying these three assertions and understanding how they reinforce each other assisted in determining the daily trade-offs many high achieving students of color make in order to be academically successful in their schools (Tabron & Chambers, 2019). All the African American students in this study have chosen to pursue academic success. Through the focus group interviews I was able to discover how they navigated through institutional level factors and how they influenced their academic success. This theory is explained in greater detail in Chapter Two.

Positionality

My personal experiences being an African American female who encountered different school environments throughout my middle and high school career have shaped my research interest. I have attended both rural and urban schools but found success in all of them. However, my brother's experiences in education were a lot different than mine. He did not experience much success academically. My educational experiences, as well as my brother's, made me very passionate about African American student academic achievement and informed my perception of this research topic.

I was very successful in school and was never consciously aware of racial stereotypes in regard to academic achievement. My dad was in the Air Force and we always lived in areas where the majority of the military families also lived, hence we all went to school together. Being that we were all military kids, we all had similar experiences traveling the world and for the most part lived amid diversity. I did not feel that I stuck out or was different while in school among my military-dependent peers. I attribute this to the way all these schools celebrated diversity and made everyone feel a part of the school culture. However, that changed my senior year when we moved to a small rural town in North Carolina.

On my first day of school, I remember walking into the lunch room and clearly seeing the students seated, but divided by race. I also remember being in a Calculus class which was made up of predominantly White students. I still can vividly remember feeling uncomfortable about being in that class. I dropped the class after the first test because I

felt that I did not belong, only to find out later that I passed that test with an A. I clearly felt “less-than” in this rural Southern school.

My brother, who is five years younger than I, struggled with similar experiences, but he was not as resilient. He did not have as many positive school experiences to draw upon from his past as I did. He started going by Tremaine, his middle name, instead of Aaron. He changed his self-image to fit more of a stereotypical thug appearance with oversized shirts and sagging pants. He also started speaking using Ebonics. His grades dropped and my parents began receiving tons of phone calls from his teachers about his behavior; he had previously never had any issues with behavior in school. After that year we moved to Washington State and once again were surrounded by a diverse community. With this move, my brother got back on the right track academically and converted back to his original style and demeanor. These school experiences have shaped my view of school dynamics. This experience has also formed my opinion that a school can create conditions that make it favorable or unfavorable for African American students to be academically successful.

My positionality as a school administrator also shapes how I view education of African American students and could influence my study. As an administrator I have served on several data committees that highlighted African American student achievement. I have witnessed the expression of negative teacher views and overheard negative comments about how African American students are incapable of performing any better than they currently are performing. Through conversations with African American students that have been sent to my office for discipline referrals, I have heard

numerous accounts of how they felt mistreated and misunderstood. All of these experiences have shaped my generalization of African American education in the U.S. Being an administrator may also influence my study. The students view me as an authority figure and may feel compelled to respond to the focus group questions in a way they feel will please me or how they feel I want them to respond. My response to this caution is detailed in Chapter Three.

Significance of Study

For decades, schools have struggled to provide an equitable place for students of color to achieve academic success. Every Student Succeeds Act mandates accountability for improving graduation rates, which requires improvement in academic achievement of all students (Kuenzi, 2008). Some students, however, are able to achieve academic success but do so at a cost. This research study is significant because it highlights the African American students that have navigated through economic vulnerability and achieved academic success while in middle school. In addition, this work adds to existing research around high-achieving students of color generally, and acts as a conversation with Dr. Terah Venzant Chambers' work with high-achieving students of color in urban and suburban contexts (Tabron & Chambers, 2019). With African American students being classified as one of the lowest performing groups in most schools, there is an increased urgency for educators to be concerned with African American student academic achievement. Lastly, this study is significant because I aimed to learn directly from students on what factors they perceive are contributing to their academic success.

Summary of Chapters

In this chapter, I introduced my research study and provided a brief overview. The problem that I investigated, which is academic achievement of students of color was also introduced. With the vast amount of research on the underachievement of African American students, my research will concentrate on lived experiences of academically successful African American middle school students. My purpose and significance for conducting this research were identified in this chapter as well. This chapter also provided background of this study, the theoretical framework, the purpose, my positionality, research questions, and the significance of this qualitative study.

In the second chapter, which is the literature review, I discuss in greater detail a review of the literature that forms the foundation for this study, such as what comprises a good school. I discuss what defines a student as being high achieving. I further explain what it means to be a high achieving student and at what cost does this status bring. I include research on schooling experiences of rural communities to highlight how these experiences can be quite different than urban and suburban experiences. Schooling experiences of historically racialized students are also included in this chapter. Due to experiences some racialized students experience, I have included research on racial injustices and police brutality.

Although I am using an asset-based approach to frame this research, I provided research on deficit-based responses to the African American achievement problem. Research on asset-based responses to the African American achievement problem is also

featured in this chapter. The second chapter concludes with research centered around the voices of students and the importance of including student voice.

In the third chapter, I present my study methodology in greater detail. Information on my pilot study and how conducting that pilot assisted in shaping this research study are included in this chapter. I describe the setting for my research, which includes some testing data for the middle school that will be the main site for my research. The criteria for selecting my research participants is presented. I conducted four focus group interviews with a total of 13 middle school students. Data storage methods are discussed in this chapter as well. I explained in detail how I will protect my research subject's information and maintain confidentiality. I conclude the third chapter with explaining how I will maintain trustworthiness and delimitations to my research study.

In the fourth chapter, I provide a review of this study and an overview of key findings from analyzing my focus group interview data. From my data analysis I arrived at 4 themes which are outlined in this chapter. Supportive information from my focus group interviews is provided in this chapter as well.

In the fifth chapter, I interpret my results by providing answers to my research questions. I provide insights and recommendations for professional practice based on my research. I conclude this chapter with reflections on what I learned from this dissertation and ideas for future research.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite the landmark Brown vs. Board of Education decision of 1954, racial inequality in education has continued to be a problem. Strides have been made toward lessening these inequalities, however significant academic achievement gaps still exist between White students and African American students. All hope is not lost in the battle toward educational equality. I believe that all African American students are capable of being geniuses. There are several African American students that have learned to successfully navigate the educational system despite obstacles. They continue to pursue academic success despite these obstacles often created by others' negative perceptions of race.

In this literature review I first present how school culture and school staff play essential roles in student success. Principals and teachers influence school culture and assist in creating school experiences that benefit African American students. When school environments have a culture that promotes academic rigor and high standards, all students can be successful despite their background. In the second session, I discuss what constitutes a student as being high achieving and gifted. African American students are often underrepresented in gifted programs which is a major concern. Therefore, I include research on the underrepresentation of African American students in gifted programs.

Third, I review research on schooling experiences of economically vulnerable rural communities and rural education. Unfortunately, today we live in a world that is still very unequal and unjust at times. Educators of historically racialized students have a duty to be knowledgeable of injustices that their students may face for awareness and in order to prepare their students for potential obstacles. In the fourth section, I explore topics of racial injustice and police brutality. In the fourth section of this literature review I provide the history of education for African Americans in the United States. This history assists in providing a basis for why African American students still struggle to succeed in schools today. I stand on the famous quote; you can't look forward without looking back. African American students that are successful in school are often faced with unforeseen challenges. These challenges are discussed in the fifth section of the literature review. When issues of equity are discussed in education, there are different responses to the under-achievement and high-achievement of students of color. Two types of responses can be categorized as deficit-based and/or asset-based. I discuss both types of responses in this literature review. Lastly, I conclude the literature review, by summarizing research on the necessity of student voice. Gaining a better understanding of literature centered on student voice is important for this dissertation. This research study is based on discovering student perspectives through their voice.

Where Do African American Students Learn the Best

Unfortunately, the United States has had a dismal history in educating African American students. For over 150 years it was illegal for states to educate African

Americans, and many southern states went as far as to create two separate school districts: one for White students and one for Black students. The school districts for Black students were often inferior when compared to school districts for White students (Bartz & Rice, 2017). In 1896, the Supreme Court ruled in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that schools will remain separate but equal. Despite this ruling, schools for Black students continued to be subordinate to schools for White students. However, in 1954 Black individual's hope of some equality was gained by the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling. The Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* that separate but equal was unconstitutional. The *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling infuriated some, but excited others. Finally, there was hope that all races would receive the same educational opportunities. Since this iconic ruling, African Americans have continued to face educational inequality and struggled to achieve academic success in traditional public schools. The inequalities African American students faced caused a great number of African American parents to seek alternative educational options for their children. Several non-traditional schools have shown promise in successfully educating African American children. Charter schools, magnet schools, private schools and learning centers are examples of some of the non-traditional schools that have flourished African American learners (West, 2016; Bartz & Rice, 2017).

What constitutes one school as better than another in educating African American students? Are all schools created equal? Some schools have implemented best practices that make them better equipped to educate students of color. All schools are not created equally. Effective schools for African American learners integrate efficacious practices

into their structures that increase African American student achievement. In the sections to follow, I discuss these practices, such as cultural responsiveness, positive teacher-student relationships, and a school environment that embraces diversity.

Principal Influence on Schools

The principal is the head of the school, they set the tone, establish goals, and determine the direction of the school. In general, principals should be transformational leaders. Bass & Bass (as cited in Bartz & Rice, 2017) explain a transformational leader as a person who encourages and motivates others to find ways to grow and change to benefit others. In addition to being transformational, principals that successfully educate African American students must acknowledge the need to be responsive to the cultures of the various subgroups within their buildings (Bartz & Rice, 2017). I define this need to be responsive to all cultures as being cultural responsiveness. Most schools that have high achieving African American students culturally responsive teaching strategies. Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis (2016) explain that there are four attributes that principals must possess to be effective culturally responsive school leaders, which are: 1) critical self-reflectors, 2) consistently develop culturally responsive teachers, 3) promote culturally responsive school environments, and 4) engage the community in culturally responsive ways (p.1283).

Institutional racism is prevalent in many schools; therefore, principals should reflect on their current policies and practices in order to identify potential trouble areas. Bratz & Rice (2017), explain institutional racism as follows:

[W]hen there are practices and policies in place that have a negative impact on African American children, even though the key educators may be unaware of them. Institutional racism may exist even if there is no identifiable person supporting or behaving in a racially biased manner toward African American children. (p. 3)

Principals have a role in limiting and even eliminating institutional racism in their buildings by providing culturally responsive professional development to teachers and using school data to see cultural gaps in achievement to address issues (Khalifa et al., 2016). Nash & Miller (2015) suggest that culturally relevant schools increase school engagement of African American students. They also report that several students of color feel that their schools and educational experiences are not culturally relevant.

In developing culturally responsive teachers, principals must also assist teachers in overcoming explicit and implicit biases they might have towards African American students. Some teachers have implicit biases which are unknown based on race, while others knowingly and willingly hold negative racial beliefs about African American students (Warikoo, Sinclair, Fei, & Jacoby-Senghor, 2016). Principals must provide opportunities for teachers to self-reflect on their behaviors and so they can identify and work toward eliminating their biases (Bratz & Rice, 2017, p. 3). For a principal to promote a culturally responsive school environment, they must work to build relationships and reduce anxiety among students (Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012). They must also be the model of how to build these relationships and promote a vision for inclusive instructional and behavioral practices (Bratz & Rice, 2017). Lastly, to promote a culturally responsive school, the principal must engage students, their families, and the community. This can be done by finding overlapping spaces for the school and the

community (Khalifa, 2012). The principal can also serve as an advocate and social activist for community-based causes in both the school and neighborhood (Khalifa, 2012). This not only shows the community and families that you care, it also allows the principal to stay informed of what is happening outside of school that may influence student behaviors and attitudes.

Teacher Influence in Schools

Similar to principals, teachers play a major role in creating inclusive classroom atmospheres where African American students have an opportunity to be successful. There have been many studies conducted on teacher characteristics that are perceived by African American students as contributing to their success or their failure in school. Bottiani, Bradshaw, & Mendelssohn (2016) surveyed 58 Black students from various high schools in Maryland. The study findings showed that the 58 Black students had fewer supportive adult relationships in school than their White peers. In a similar study conducted by Vega, Moore, & Miranda (2015), the researchers investigated factors that African American and Latino high school students perceived as barriers to positive educational opportunities. Eighteen students participated in the study. The researchers concluded that teachers were the barriers to African American and Latino students' academic success. The students felt that teachers did not care about the lessons they taught their students. The students also informed the researchers that the students didn't provide them with support. African American students have expressed that effective teachers are caring, empathetic, and make learning engaging and relevant to them (St. Mary, Calhoun, Tejada, & Jenson, 2018).

Along with specific teacher characteristics, there is also a belief held by some that the best teachers for underserved minority students are teachers from their same race or ethnicity (Redding, 2019). Researchers have studied Black and Latino teacher assignment:

For some Black and Latino/a students who face entrenched marginalization and discrimination in schools, receiving an assignment to a teacher of another race/ethnicity can result in them being perceived as more disruptive in class, having a greater chance of being referred to the front office, and they are at greater risk of harsher disciplinary actions. (Redding, 2019, p. 500)

The public school system is staffed predominately by White teachers and principals; schools are also governed by standards based upon middle class White norms for classroom decorum and behavior (Wright, Gottfried, and Le, 2017). When a school system sets all its student norms and expectations on the beliefs and values of one race it's difficult for individuals from another race with differing values to succeed in that system. In a seminal study where researcher, Rist (2000) and three other researchers followed and documented African American children in St. Louis from the first day of kindergarten to second grade, he found that African American students who did not conform to White middle-class expectations established for the school, such as appearance, behavior or family structure were treated differently in school. Rist (2000) further explained that the students were judged by their teachers and received less teaching time, attention and rewards. When the students in the study realized that they had been judged by their teachers, they were less likely to be successful (Rist, 2000). Wright et al. (2017) provide a solution:

Cultural syn-chronization can enhance the educational outcomes of students of color because teachers of color whose race/ethnicity matches their students can leverage their common cultural experiences to create a culturally relevant learning environment and engage in culturally appropriate pedagogical strategies. (p.80S)

Milner (2018) agrees that grouping students with a teacher of their same race may increase their opportunity to learn. Redding (2019) explains that “with a same-race teacher, a student may experience higher expectations, a more supportive relationship, culturally relevant instruction, or role-modeling, all of which can improve their academic and nonacademic performance in school” (p. 500).

School Environment

Schools are faced with many challenges. Slashed budgets, overcrowding, lack of qualified teachers, student and family hardships, as well as testing accountability pressures can make it easy for school leaders to ignore or make excuses for the lack of quality instruction. Poverty is also a common excuse that is frequently used to justify poor African American student achievement. Whether a school is composed of low-income students or not, there are specific school environmental factors that influence African American student success in schools. Pitre (2014) elaborates:

Using poverty as an explanation for low performance has been disproven with evidence from several high performing schools that consist of predominantly low income, minority students. (p.6)

Delpit (2012) visited several high performing schools that served predominantly low-income Black students. Most of these schools outperformed more affluent schools on standardized tests. In Delpit’s research, she compared the high-achieving, low-income

African American schools with low achieving, low-income African American schools. From her comparisons, she developed a list of school environmental factors that were present at all of the high achieving, low-income schools. Delpit (2012) concluded that all the high-achieving schools that served the low-income African American students valued meaningful learning experiences. All of the high-achieving schools provided academic rigor in all their classes. Lastly, Delpit (2012) expressed that all the high-achieving schools instilled in their teachers the belief that every student was capable of academic success.

Quality schools have a culture of academic rigor and high standards for each student. All curriculum and instruction are aligned with high standards at good schools (Lipsitz and West, 2006). Rigorous instruction is what sets exemplar schools apart from low performing ones. African American students are aware when they are not receiving meaningful instruction and will likely resist or disengage (Pitre, 2014). The type of instructional strategies that teachers use are valuable because depending on the type of strategy utilized, it has the ability to engage students and effectively teach them the content. Not all instructional strategies are effective in teaching African American students and nurturing high academic achievement. As presented earlier in the Delpit (2012) study, schools that were successful in increasing the achievement of African American students integrate meaningful and rigorous instruction into their daily practice. Engaging students in project-based learning is an example of effective instructional practice.

Instructional activities are meaningful and rigorous when students are asked to identify, investigate and propose solutions and/or take actions to address real world problems or controversial issues they care about (i.e., stand your ground legislation, gun violence, climate change, texting while driving, food desserts/food justice). (Pitre, 2014)

Effective schools ensure low suspension rates. Students can't learn if they are not in school. To assist in lowering suspension rates these effective schools provide a variety of emotional and social support for their students. Peer mediation is used at good schools in order to teach students how to solve problems before they escalate into a physical fight or aggression (Lipsitz and West, 2006). This point is especially important to this study when one considers that students of color are suspended at much higher rates than the general population (Mansfield, Fowler, & Rainbolt, 2018).

There have been several researchers that have also discussed themes that exist in high performing schools of predominantly minority students. These themes are curriculum that focuses particularly on math and reading, professional development for teachers, organization of network and resources, and using data to drive instructional decisions (Brown, 2016, Fisher & Crawford, 2020). It is also noted by Lee and Bierman (2015) that these themes are even more beneficial when the school serves a low-income population.

What Defines a Student as High-Achieving?

High-achieving students can be defined in various ways. For example, some define a high-achieving student as a student that excels in all of their academic courses (Loveless, Parkas & Duffett, 2008). A student may be defined as high-achieving as well

if they are enrolled in an advanced math or English class. A student may also be referenced as high-achieving if they score proficient or above on a standardized assessment (Loveless et al., 2008). In the Loveless et al. (2008) study, the status of high-achieving students during the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) era was investigated. The researchers determined achievement levels based on National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data. According to Loveless, Parkas & Duffett (2008), high-achievers score in the 90th percentile or above on the math NAEP and few of them are eligible for free or reduced lunch (p.27). Among the 90th percentile high-achievers, nationwide, 61.1% of them are White students, 16.1% are Black students, and 16.2% are Hispanic students (Loveless et al., 2008). But as Mansfield (2016, 2015a) points out, one should not conclude that only White students and relatively wealthy students are genetically predisposed to be high-achievers. Rather, one must consider numerous variables that come into play such as biased testing and racial and economic segregation. In this section, I discuss characteristics that are associated with being a high-achieving and/or gifted student. I also discuss the disproportionality of students of color being identified as high-achieving.

Characteristics of High-Achievers and Gifted Students

Schools play a part in a student becoming a high-achieving student. Commonly, high-achieving students attend adequately funded schools and have higher quality teachers. High-achievers typically are more likely to attend suburban schools, versus low-achieving students who are more likely to attend large urban schools (Loveless et al., 2008). Nationally, high and low-achievers attend dramatically different schools. About 1

in 7 eighth-grade high-achievers attended a private school, and only 10.6% attended a high-poverty school (Loveless et al., 2008, p. 30). As previously mentioned, high-achieving students are more likely to enroll in advanced mathematics classes.

When comparing high-achievers to an average pupil or a typical low-achieving student—high-achieving students come from higher income families and their mothers are more educated. Their schools are less likely to serve low-income children and they take higher-level math courses. All of their teachers have more experience compared to low-achieving students. In particular, their math teachers are more likely to have majored or minored in math in college. (Loveless et al., 2008, p.35)

Some high-achieving students may be labeled as gifted, which qualifies them to take academically or intellectually advanced courses. When discussing giftedness, it is valuable to include cognitive abilities into the conversation. It has been documented that gifted students do not use qualitatively different thinking abilities. In a study by Arancibia, Boyanova & González (2016), a sample of over 5,000 ten to eleven-year-old children that were being identified for gifted services were investigated in order to determine their cognitive characteristics. All of the students were classified as economically disadvantaged. The gifted students developed their thinking abilities faster and at an earlier age than their nongifted peers (Arancibia et al., 2016, p. 745). Some of the cognitive characteristics of gifted students are that they are able to retain large quantities of information, they have advanced comprehension skills, high curiosity, and a high level of language development and verbal ability (Arancibia, Boyanova & González, 2016, p. 744). When looking at high-achieving gifted students, there are seven aspects in which gifted children can differ from low-achieving students: (1) they have great

memories; (2) they are more aware of their metacognitive processes; (3) they spend more time on planning and less on reporting the solution; (4) they know how to better exclude irrelevant data, which aids in problem solving; (5) they are able to switch between different strategies easier and faster; (6) they are flexible; (7) they desire complexity in tasks and learning (Shore & Kanevsky, 1993).

Underrepresentation of High-Achieving Students of Color

Huge race disparities exist in student receipt of gifted education services in U.S. schools (Grissom & Redding, 2016). This is not just a problem because it indicates unequal educational opportunities for minority students, but because studies have shown that being in a gifted program provides positive future outcomes which include better academic performance and improvements in motivation, self-efficacy, engagement with learning and less stress (Grissom & Redding, 2016). In a study of a Georgia school system, there were substantial differences found in the number of students nominated for the gifted and talented program based on socioeconomic status (SES) and race/ethnicity groups (Lakin, 2016).

Research provides some potential reasons for the underrepresentation of Black students in gifted education. Black students often have low achievement which disqualifies them from gifted programs. Some Black families may not have additional funds to enroll their child in supplemental academic programs after school or have access to information about alternative identification processes to have their child tested outside of the school setting. Outside testing is often needed for minority students because students of color are generally less likely than White students to be identified even when

they satisfy criteria for gifted services (Grissom & Redding, 2016). Black students are also less likely to attend a school that offers a gifted program.

Inequities in the gifted selection process can also lead to underrepresentation of students of color in gifted programs. Because the gifted process often starts with the teacher, students of color can be disadvantaged if the teachers hold lower expectations for them or are less likely to recognize giftedness in students of color (Grissom & Redding, 2016). However, it has been found that teachers of color are more likely than White teachers to nominate students from their same racial or ethnic background and the student's probability of being assigned to the gifted program are higher with same race teachers (Grissom & Redding, 2016). Research also shows that Black and Hispanic students are better represented in gifted programs when the school is predominantly composed of Black and/or Hispanic students and teachers (Grissom & Redding, 2016).

Schooling Experiences of High-Achieving Students of Color

Rather than studying high-achieving students of color, a lot of attention has been placed on low academic performing students of color (Tabron & Chambers, 2019). However, there are several students of color that defy this category and perform well in school. Some argue that the low performance of students of color may be due to American schools adopting instructional practices based on White norms as well as ignoring the learning styles of students of color. Despite these hurdles, high-achieving students of color are able to overcome and are often referred to in research as resilient. However, researchers rarely explain the high premium they pay to achieve academic success (Tabron & Chambers, 2019).

During the “schooling” process, some students of color have their social and cultural values taken from them in order to conform to White middle-class norms (Chambers & Huggins, 2014). Schools play a vital role in the perpetuation of societal inequalities (Chambers, Locke, & Tagarao, 2015). In most schools in the United States, White norms are used to judge who and what are of value (Chambers et al., 2015). In this section I discuss the struggles I experienced as a high-achieving student of color and the racial opportunity cost associated with my academic success. In a study by Chambers & Huggins (2014), eighteen African American and Latino students revealed racial opportunity costs they experienced in school due to their high achievement. Chambers & Huggins (2014) urge us to consider the effects of being an African American student that has to navigate a White-normed space. One of the major effects of navigating this type of space are racial opportunity costs. Racial opportunity cost is the price that students of color pay in their pursuit of academic success (Chambers & Huggins, 2014). Tabron & Chambers (2019) describe it as, “tradeoffs or the value of missed opportunities that students of color forfeit to achieve academic success in white-normed school environments” (p.125).

Struggles to Being High-Achieving

Two of the most contested researchers on Black student achievement are John Ogbu and Signithia Fordham (Chambers & Huggins, 2014). Based on Ogbu’s research, the underperformance of Black students in schools was due to the history of poor and inferior treatment of Black students in America (Tabron & Chambers, 2019). He argued that Black students who reject anything associated with White ideologies or norms,

including academic achievement, are not successful (Tabron & Chambers, 2019). Ogbu argues that Black students who choose to adopt White student preferences are academically successful, however they ultimately lose their Black identity (Ogbu, 2004, p. 25).

Similar to Ogbu, Fordham explained that African American students who achieve academic success are conflicted because they reject their racial and cultural identity in the process of achieving success (Stinson, 2010). However, Fordham added that Black students who assimilate to White school norms, either consciously or unconsciously, distance themselves from the Black collective identity (Stinson, 2010). Ogbu and Fordham's research is highly controversial because rather than interrogate existing institutional racism, they seem to imply that Black students are at fault for the school conditions that hinder their achievement (Tabron & Chambers, 2019). Although these researchers are contested, I see value in their work based on my educational experiences. During my pilot study, the students commented that by being an academically successful Black student they have been labeled as nerds. They also discussed that other Black students may not perform well in school because they want to maintain their "image."

Some researchers offer similar arguments, such as having a strong Black identity and embracing Black culture present a challenge for Black students who are trying to achieve academically (Burrell, Winston, & Freeman, 2012). Stinson (2010) discussed Ogbu and Fordham's (1986) collective work in which they attempted to explain how Black students who are high-achieving manage the burden of acting White in school. Ogbu and Fordham claim that few Black students have learned how to develop strategies

to cope with juggling academic success in schools. Ogbu and Fordham's research also found that high-achieving Black students tend to camouflage their success by participating in athletics, by being class clowns, and some even acquired protection from school "bullies" in exchange for assistance in schoolwork (Stinson, 2010, p. 55).

In a study conducted by Ford, Grantham, and Whiting (2008), 166 certified academically gifted Black students in grades 5th through 12th were surveyed regarding their achievement-related attitudes and perceptions of "acting White" and "acting Black." Several of the gifted Black students revealed that they faced negative peer pressures, and attribute acting White to school achievement, intelligence, and positive school behaviors and attitudes; while attributing acting Black to negative school achievement, low intelligence, and poor behaviors and attitudes (Ford et al., 2008).

Racial Opportunity Cost and School Experiences

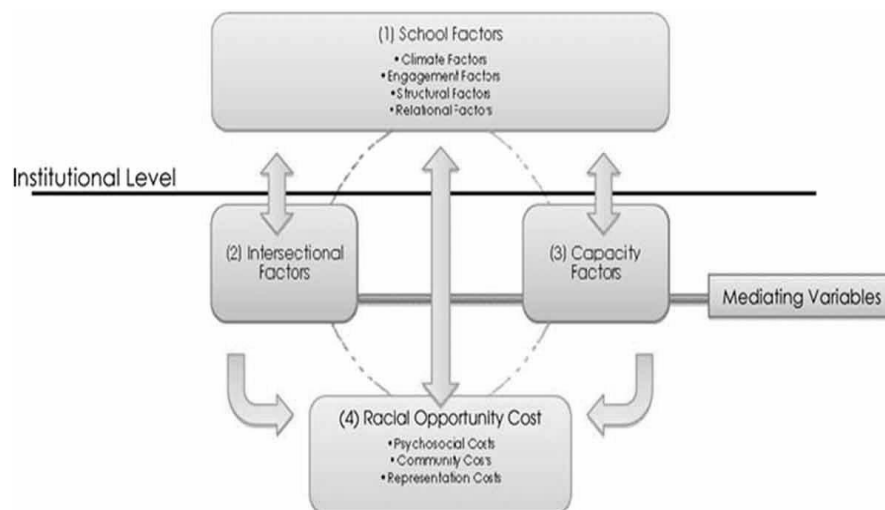
Research suggests that even though some students of color may be high-achieving, that does not mean that they are having positive school experiences. Using a critical perspective, Tabron and Chambers (2019) use the concept of racial opportunity cost components (i.e. community costs, psychosocial costs, and representation costs) to examine what students of color endure to achieve academic success in their schools.

Some students of color feel that their thoughts, behaviors, and feelings about academic success are influenced by school norms and their interactions with others (Tabron & Chambers, 2019). A few psychosocial costs high-achieving students of color experience are feelings that academic success comes at the expense of feeling valued and included only if you assimilate to the White norms of the school (Tabron & Chambers,

2019). Students can also feel alone due to having to suppress their cultural identity in order to access the best academic resources at their schools (Tabron & Chambers, 2019, p.129). Thoughts of isolation are also often experienced due to high-achieving students of color being the only student of color in advanced classes or participating in certain extracurricular activities (Chambers et al., 2015).

Figure 1

Racial Opportunity Cost Model (Tabron & Chambers, 2019)



Representation costs are also a burden of high-achieving students of color. This type of cost is manifested when the students feel that they have to carry the load of their entire race. These students can feel like tokens that must prove that students from their race can be high-achievers (Tabron & Chambers, 2019). Research by Chambers, Huggins, Locke, & Fowler (2014), believe that as students of color achieve academic success, their success is still minimized as an exception or deviation from the norm in the eyes of their peers and teachers (p. 130). In a study conducted by Chambers et al. (2015),

the researchers concluded based on student responses that high-achieving students of color feel at times that their White classmates did not view them as peers, but rather irregular fixtures in their advanced classes (p. 803).

High-achieving students of color can experience community costs for success as well. A study conducted by Tabron & Chambers (2019) showed that students express losing a connection to their cultural communities as they pursue academic success (p.132). One of the research participants in Tabron & Chambers' (2019) study explained how he felt that he had to conform to the White-normed practices of his school due to his academic success, which caused him to not be able to relate enough to his cultural group. One of Tabron & Chambers' research participants stated:

I am the Whitest kid amongst all the Black kids. And, I don't like being like the novelty Black kid or anything. But, it's like you're kinda put in that position.
(p.132)

High-achieving students of color can feel a sense of scrutiny by their communities due to their speech, dress and behaviors (Chambers et al., 2015).

Research on Schooling Experiences in Rural Communities

Every state in the nation has a rural population. According to Showalter et al. (2019), "nearly 7.5 million public school students were enrolled in rural school districts across the country" (p. 1). Most of the schools in these rural districts are low performing, which creates challenges for the students in regard to their education (Blad, 2019). African American students that attend schools considered Rural Low Income by the Rural Education Achievement Program are four times less likely to meet Adequate

Yearly Progress than other rural students (Irvin, Farmer, Leung, Thompson, & Hutching, 2010). One of the challenges that rural students face is the lack of highly qualified teachers available. In this section I give an overview of rural education and discuss school experiences of rural students. In a report on rural education by Showalter, Hartman, Johnson & Klein (2019), the researchers analyze contexts and conditions of rural education in each of the 50 states. The researchers appeal to policymakers to address rural education issues in their respective states.

Rural Education

According to Showalter et al. (2019), North Carolina is one of the highest-priority states in rural education. As a high-priority state North Carolina has a large amount of low performing rural schools. Economic conditions are grave in the state's rural areas, with more than one in five school-aged children living in poverty and per-pupil instructional spending more than \$1,000 below the national average. Unlike in most other states, North Carolina's rural students have much lower achievement than non-rural students. More than half a million students attend rural schools in North Carolina and more than one in five of them are living in poverty. (Showalter et al., 2019, p.4)

Research also shows that 27% of rural teachers had professional development available in their schools compared to 40% in urban and suburban areas (Showalter et al., 2019). In addition, rural schools offer fewer higher-level courses, with more advanced math courses offered in suburban and urban areas than in rural areas (Showalter et al., 2019). With less money collected in taxes in rural areas, the schools receive less money than urban schools (Hoffman, Anderson-Butcher, Fuller, & Bates, 2017). Without

adequate funding, it is difficult to attract highly trained teachers and pay for the innovative curriculum to support gifted and advanced courses. Moreover, rural students do not score as high on advanced assessments when compared to their urban/suburban peers, even if they are enrolled in advanced courses (Showalter et al., 2019). Even rural students identified as gifted report that they feel less challenged in their higher-level courses than their urban and suburban peers (Showalter et al., 2019). Rural students also experience more financial need, lower parental higher education attainment rates, and lower educational attainment aspirations than their counterparts (Blad, 2019, p.2).

Being an African American student in a rural area only exacerbates challenges in this already harsh reality. African American rural students have the limitations that come with living in a rural area and the low expectations affiliated with being part of a historically underachieving academic subgroup. According to Blad (2019) this is due to several factors, such as rural schools having small numbers of students distributed over large geographic areas and rural schools are often far from research universities (p.2).

School Experiences

School experiences for rural students are not always encouraging. Students served in rural settings may experience barriers to their learning that negatively influence their achievement (Hoffman et. al., 2017). A large portion of rural students come from low-income families. Rural students from low-income families and minority backgrounds demonstrate lower academic achievement than their higher income counterparts, in particular White peers (Irvin, Byun, Meece, Reed, & Farmer, 2016). Irvin et. al. (2016) pointed out that:

Although the percentage of youth eligible for a free or reduced-price lunch in rural schools (38%) are slightly lower than the national average (41%; Provasnik et al., 2007), the largest populations of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch in rural schools are from racial/ethnic minority backgrounds. Specifically, African American (60%), Hispanic/Latino (54%), and Native American (69%) students in rural areas are more likely than their White peers to attend schools where more than 50% of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. (p. 179)

Similar to not having funding for curricula and highly trained teachers, rural schools often do not have funding for health and social services. When students' health and well-being are compromised, they are less likely to be successful in school (Hoffman et. al., 2017). Rural student's academic performance can be affected by several factors, which can include peer interactions, and family and school factors. Rural students are often faced with restricted social networks due to living in poverty which increases their risks for associations with delinquent peers and substance abuse (Evans, Cotter, Rose, & Smokowski, 2016). According to a study conducted by Smokowski, Cotter, Robertson, & Guo (2013) who surveyed 3,610 rural middle school youth, a wide range of the rural youth reported being bullied in school. Positive peer interactions have been shown to promote academic success in rural youth (Hoffman et. al., 2017). Extracurricular activities and out of school activities have significantly strengthened these positive peer interactions in rural youth. Along with activities and positive peer interactions, family dynamics also influence the achievement of rural youth. Due to rural families often experiencing economic hardships and poor living conditions, students may have adjustment problems in school. However, when parents are engaged in their children's learning, rural youth have higher self-esteem, and greater aspirations for academic success (Hoffman et. al., 2017). School factors that affect rural student academic

achievement consist of supportive teacher and student relationships and close school and community partnerships. Positive youth development activities, such as after school programs and sports are linked to positive academic outcomes for rural youth (Hardaway, McLoyd, & Wood, 2012).

Research on the Schooling Experiences of Historically Racialized Students

In this section of the literature review, I provide a brief overview of the school experiences of historically racialized students. Students of color are often categorized as a historically racialized group. They have been placed within highly racialized contexts and have been marginalized due to the conditions created by poverty and social disadvantage (Tabron & Chambers, 2019). From 1849-1950, African American people have faced racial discrimination and hardships (“A Century of Racial Segregation,” n.d.). Three

Constitutional amendments were passed after slavery to grant newly freed African American individual’s legal status: the Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery, the Fourteenth Amendment provided citizenship, and the Fifteenth Amendment guaranteed the right to vote (“A Century of Racial Segregation,” n.d.). African American individual’s struggles and the well-defined gap between White people and Black people can be credited to several things traced back to slavery.

The first documented Africans were brought to the United States in 1619 (Sandifer & Renfer, 2003). African people were stripped of their language and culture and forced to live in a world unfamiliar to them. It only got worse as more and more Africans were brought over. African American people were denied an education and the males were regarded as ignorant and less than human when compared to White people.

School and education were reserved only for White people. But despite all of that, several African American people found ways to educate themselves and several learned to read.

North Carolina took an extra step to deny education for African American people by enacting a law after the slave revolt led by Nat Turner in 1831. North Carolina created an anti-literacy law, which made it a crime to teach any African American person to read or write. It wasn't until 1863 after the Civil War, that an army chaplain named Vincent Colyer established the first legal school for African American people on Roanoke Island, North Carolina (Sandifer & Renfer, 2003). It has been roughly 156 years since education was first offered legally to African American students in North Carolina. It is well-documented by many researchers that schools provide an unequal opportunity structure for students of color (Tabron & Venzant, 2019). Due to the United States' attempts to forget its racial history and the effects of historical exclusion, beliefs have formed within schools that students of color are genetically and culturally inferior (Tabron & Chambers, 2019).

Students of color are often enrolled in low-level non-rigorous coursework (Tabron & Chambers, 2019). They are over-identified in special education, receive more discipline referrals and are less likely than any other group to be identified in academically or intellectually gifted (AIG) or other talent groups (Tabron & Chambers, 2019). There are roughly 3.4 million high-achieving students of color (Tabron et al., 2017, p.118). Understanding how these students navigate the difficult terrain of today's schools will lead us to figuring out how to support the achievement of larger numbers of students of color (Noguera, 2003, p. 446).

Deficit-Based Responses to Perceived Achievement Problems

Research on students of color has long employed a deficit-based perspective (Locke, Tabron & Chambers, 2017). These students are often blamed for achievement gaps in schools but the systemic barriers that exist in schools are not recognized (Tabron et al., 2017). Several deficits have been identified as hindrances to Black students' academic success, such as the lack of parental support, students' inability to acculturate to the school, the use of nonstandard vernacular and poverty (Locke et al., 2017, p.15). One of the troubles with deficit-based approaches to the Black student achievement problem, is when you begin to transfer your negative mindset about a group of people to others, you can exacerbate the issue. Others may also begin to think this group is dysfunctional and unable to learn (Asset and Deficit Based Approaches, 2020). As stated by Tabron & Chambers (2019), this deficit orientation about the capacity of students of color has resulted in teachers having low expectations of success for these students (p.122). In the sections to follow, I discuss how African American students are often blamed for their underachievement. I also discuss the impact of resilience among African American students.

Student Blame

As previously mentioned, Ogbu and Fordham are two researchers that are viewed by many as deficit thinkers. From her research on the implications of school-tracking practices for Black student achievement, Tabron & Chambers (2019) argued that Ogbu and Fordham perpetuated deficit thinking (p.121). Tabron & Chambers (2019) describe,

Although their [Ogbu and Fordham] argument notes the historical foundation of racism that characterizes these contemporary interactions, African American students themselves are still seen as experiencing ambivalence and affective dissonance in ways that prevent them from attaining school success. The implication remains that if they were to change their mindset, academic success would follow. Ultimately, from the authors' perspective, these students are responsible for their lack of achievement. (p.121)

Students cannot be viewed as the problem if we are going to find a solution for African American student underachievement. Another deficit-based response to Black student underachievement is the notion of resiliency. It can be viewed that if we teach all Black students to be resilient, then they all will become high-achievers.

Resilience

Kim & Hargrove (2013) defines educational resiliency as a student's ability to succeed academically, despite difficult and challenging life circumstances and risk factors that prevent them from succeeding (p.300). Other researchers describe resilience as a process of “navigating” oneself toward a particular resource (Ungar, 2008; Rutter, 2007). Resilient students avoid dreadful educational outcomes associated with a historically underprivileged socio-economic status (Morales and Trotman, 2011). Although it is significant to highlight adaptive strategies and intrinsic motivations some students of color have been able to use to achieve high academic success, this is not the sole solution to the underachievement problem of Black students.

Many African American students are faced with systemic racism and biases while attending school. These students are encouraged by many to demonstrate perseverance and grit despite the negative factors they may encounter. The problem with encouraging students to ignore injustices is that it teaches the African American students to ignore the

unjustifiable racial opportunity costs that they pay to attain success in White-normed spaces (Tabron & Chambers, 2019, p. 123). Most literature on resilience fails to acknowledge how children and families of color might be negatively affected by their efforts to keep striving despite pervasive challenges and hardships that they face daily (Murry, Butler-Barnes, Mayo-Gamble, & Inniss-Thompson, 2018). Instead of labeling academically successful students as resilient, educators and families should teach students how to navigate systemic racism and acknowledge the obstacles they may face for being a high-achieving student. Anderson (2019) gives an explanation of the risk involved with not acknowledging African American students' potential hardships:

We run the risk of perpetuating further marginalization if we continue to constantly promote adaptive behaviors from historically oppressed African American families without also engaging in social justice work that opposes the systemic challenges that affect most African American families daily. (p. 386)

Asset-Based Responses to Perceived Achievement Problems

The second possible approach to studying a problem is by utilizing an asset-based response. In an asset-based response to a perceived issue, you shift the focus from “the problem is due to you” to “here is what’s right with you or here is what works” (Asset and Deficit Based Approaches, 2020). Asset-based responses acknowledge that there may be problems within the group, but also that there is untapped potential inherent in everyone that can be used to improve the current obstacle (Asset and Deficit Based Approaches, 2020). In this section, various asset-based responses to African American student academic achievement are presented. I begin this section by discussing the importance of parental support, the impact of school culture on student achievement, and

conclude by reviewing the effect of student-teacher relationships and academic achievement.

Parental Support

There is numerous research that shows that the majority of African American students want to do well in school (Noguera, 2003). These students are most successful in schools where academic success for African American students is the norm. In a 2001 study by Noguera in northern California, 537 Black high school students were surveyed on their experiences in school. 90% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that they think education is important and want to go to college (Noguera, 2003). African Americans can be successful if the school provides resources and creates support that aligns with the school's conditions to promote Black student success (Noguera, 2003).

Several students of color each year are academically high-achievers and experience positive school experiences due to various influencers. Stewart (2007) conducted a study on a sample of 10th grade Black students to examine what student predictors influenced academic achievement. From his research, Stewart discovered that predictors such as student effort, parent-child discussions, and positive peer relationships played a significant role in increasing the student's academic achievement. Furthermore, Stewart concluded that school climate has a major role in Black student achievement as well.

Howard (2013) conducted a study where he interviewed several high-achieving Black middle-class boys and revealed that their parents held high expectations for academic success and expected the same of them. Hines and Holcomb-McCoy (2013)

supported this statement based on data they collected from 153 Black 11th and 12th grade students from two large urban high schools in a major city in the northeastern region of the United States. The researchers gave the students an Academic and Family Supplemental Questionnaire, which showed that two-parent homes were positive predictors of GPA for Black students (p. 74).

While conducting my pilot study, my interview participants attributed their academic success to their parents, mainly their mother's high expectations. One student commented, “my mom doesn’t play when it comes to grades, I will be punished if I fail a test.” This notion of high parental expectations has been studied by researchers for decades. A survey given to 230 fifth- and sixth-grade students by Marchant et al. (2001) revealed that the students’ perception of their parents’ expectations and aspirations regarding their achievement motivated them to value higher academic achievements.

School Culture

School culture and climate play a valuable role in African American Student academic success. Some schools have been successful with African American students by creating schools that focus solely on their needs and have developed a unique curriculum that integrates African American history and culture. Milwaukee Public Schools designated an elementary school and a middle school as African Immersion Schools, making them the first public school district to approve such a plan. One of the schools’ initiatives is to highlight the accomplishments and achievements of African American people. They even use the first letter of famous African Americans' names to teach the alphabet to their Kindergartners (Leake & Leake, 1992).

Researchers contribute the success of these schools on their ability to allow students to build a positive self-identity through cultural awareness; cultivate a sense of purpose and confidence; develop a healthy balance between individualization as well as building a sense of belonging; and an open door to career possibilities, all of which represent commonalities of successful programs (Bailey & Paisley, 2004). Researchers for decades, such as Murphy & Hallinger (1985) and Sizemore (1988) have explained that effective schools for African American students have:

(a) a clear sense of purpose, (b) core standards within a rigorous curriculum, (c) high expectations, (d) a commitment to educate all students (e) a safe and orderly learning environment, (f) strong partnerships with parents, and (g) a problem-solving attitude. Unfortunately, most African American students are not enrolled in these effective schools that provide high quality instruction to cater to their cultural needs. (Fashola, 2005, p.68)

Student-Teacher Relationships

If African American students have supportive, caring teachers they are more likely to be successful. However, if students feel that their teachers do not care about their academic performance, the likelihood that they will succeed is reduced (Noguera, 2003). In Noguera's 2001 study, 537 Black High School students in Northern California were surveyed, when asked to rate the statements: "My teachers treat me fairly" and "My teachers support me and care about my success in their class." In response, only 18% of students agreed or strongly agreed to the first statement, and 3% agreed or disagreed with the second statement (Noguera, 2003). Maintaining positive student-teacher relationships has been recognized as effective ways to increase Black students' academic achievement (Cholewa et al., 2012). Woodward (2018) identifies three factors that contribute to

producing effective student-teacher relationships, which are:

(1) Teachers must hold positive perceptions toward their students; (2) have the willingness to implement culturally relevant pedagogy; and (3) validate the voices of students regarding ways to enhance their pedagogy within their classroom. (p. 69)

Research That Centers the Voices of Students

It is time for researchers to engage in critical conversations with Black students in the educational battle. It is not an easy task to engage young people in critical conversations. It is essential for young people and students to feel comfortable speaking about their thoughts and feelings (Mansfield, 2015b, p.35). As previously mentioned, teachers have the ability to create inclusive environments for their students that allow them to feel comfortable being vulnerable and have conversations about social justice. When research is centered around student voice, it adds moral authority to the endeavor as students are able to speak for themselves (Mansfield, 2015b). Student voice in research enables adults to gain access into the life of students. It gives adults pertinent insight into the challenge's students face. This section provides a basis for the usefulness of including student voice in research studies.

Importance of Student Voice

Student voice in research is necessary because it allows educational leaders to clearly understand “the extent to which educational policies and practices authentically serve the students in which they were intended,” (Mansfield, 2014, p. 396). Student voice is needed because it is the critical voice that will inform the discussion on how to increase student achievement, which will promote educational change (Mansfield, 2014, p. 396).

Unfortunately, students, especially historically racialized students, are often the “subject of policies rather than being the actors in shaping the policies,” (Mansfield, 2014, p. 398). It is of utmost interest that educational research studies advocate for social justice and promote change in communities, which can be achieved authentically through the use of student voice (Mansfield, 2014, p. 398-99).

Student voice allows students the opportunity to become reflective participants in our democratic society (Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy, 2019). It's valuable when utilizing student voice to include diverse perspectives, particularly those from historically marginalized groups (Bron, & Veugelers, 2014). When research utilizes student voice, the content gained from the students has the potential to be very crucial in creating transformational change within the education system (Butler, Kane, & Morshead, 2017). Students are valuable assets. The knowledge gained from students' perceptions can potentially provide researchers with valuable insight into the strengths and weaknesses, as well as the successes and ongoing challenges, within educational systems. (Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy, 2019).

Summary

In this chapter, I presented an overview of the research that informs my topic on rural African American student achievement. While conducting this research study, it was critical to gain a greater understanding on topics that are pertinent to this group of students. Rural students are often at a disadvantage compared to their urban counterparts due to lack of school funding and the availability of highly qualified teachers. Being African American and rural complicates matters more due to the racial inequalities,

poverty, and racial opportunity costs African Americans face. It is challenging to be successful in schools that are based on White middle-class norms. However, not all schools are the same. There are schools that support African American academic success, wherein teachers and principals greatly influence.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Middle school is often a tough time period for youth. During this time, they are undergoing developmental changes physically and mentally. However, some groups of students seem to navigate these challenges more successfully than others. African American students are a demographic of students that often have a hard time achieving academic success. Systemic racism and major opportunity gaps are some of the contributing factors to African American's academic struggles as compared to White students. In addition, African Americans are subjected to unfortunate events such as, discrimination, police brutality, and predatory enforcement of regulatory law at higher rates than other races (Patton, Crenshaw, Haynes, Watson, 2016).

According to Creswell (2012), qualitative research is a good strategy to use when the goal is to center the voices of people who have been silenced or who are subject to stereotypical assumptions and beliefs by dominant populations. African American students face many negative stereotypes, often centering around their academic abilities. By studying the experiences of academically successful African American boys and girls, I add to existing research in a student-centered, positively-focus way and help to explain an issue of concern within a minoritized population (Creswell, 2012).

The purpose of this study is to understand how successful rural African American students perceive their experiences in school. I hope to hear directly from students to better understand the variables that challenge students as well as help students reach their goals. From their input, I hope to develop strategies to support all rural students to become more successful in middle school.

Pilot Field Work

When first exploring the topic of African American achievement, I wanted to interview individual middle school students. I was so excited to interview the students and felt that I was prepared with great questions, however each interview felt like an utter failure. I struggled to get the students to talk and each interview was filled with awkward silence. This experience prompted me to seek a different method: I selected focus group interviews for my second round of pilot field work.

I felt students would feel more comfortable being interviewed in a group setting. I also felt the students would be able to feed off of each other's responses to allow for more of a conversation. For my second pilot I conducted two focus group interviews with 4 Black male eighth grade students at South Hill Middle School (pseudonym). Since I was not able to gain much information from the individual interviews, I elected to conduct these focus groups to determine if middle school students would be able to express themselves enough for me to gain valuable information about their school experiences.

Drawing upon Hennink's (2014) research, the focus group I conducted led to interactive discussion with students feeding off of each other. When one student would answer the question, another one was ready to jump in and add their perspective. The

focus groups took place at the school and lasted a little over 30 minutes. However, I feel it could have lasted longer if I had had more questions prepared.

The focus group interview was very informative. All of the boys were more than willing to share. They were very open when sharing their opinions with me. Each boy shared how their parents were strong influencers to their academic success. Their responses prompted me to read more research about factors that influence successful Black male achievement. The focus group interview with the boys left me wanting to learn more and made me curious about how African American girls were fairing in middle school as well. During my comprehensive examination process, my doctoral committee encouraged me to expand my work to include girls. Their reasoning was that there is recent concern, especially among researchers such as Watson (2016) and Crenshaw, Ocean, and Nanda (2015) that Black girls are not receiving adequate attention even though they are subject to the same biases and stereotyping as Black males (Schwartz, 2015).

Thus, I proposed to conduct four separate focus group interviews, two boys and two girls groups. However, due to my inability to recruit enough boys, I conducted four focus group interviews, which consisted of three groups of girls and one group of boys. This decision was based on research, personal and professional experiences, and the advice of my dissertation committee. For example, it is well-documented that females and males of all ages tend to like and prefer being with their same-gender peers than with their other-gender peers (Ruble, Martin, & Berenbaum, 2006; Bukowski & DeLay, 2020). In addition, my experience as a middle school educator has taught me that girls or

boys often speak more with their same gender peers. My committee also wondered whether there may be gendered differences in the students' experiences. Bukowski & DeLay (2020) also explain that there are a general set of differences between what goes on in the peer interactions of girls and boys. By using same gender grouping I hoped to eliminate distractions and differing peer interactions. This seemed especially important later on when I had difficulties recruiting interested boys. It seemed unfair to construct groups that might have only one boy and three girls, for example.

I aimed for 60-minutes but was flexible according to students' attention spans. Based on my pilot field work experiences, I decided to add more questions to my focus group protocol. My hope was that the longer amount of time allotted, along with more concise questions, would lead to a richer discussion. The pilot focus group also influenced my decision to explore research involving resisting Whiteness. Racism came up a few times during pilot work and I felt it was worth exploring further.

Thus, in addition to specific questions, I also included probes to garner additional information. For example, when a student commented that some people "don't want to be viewed as acting White" when asked about hindrances to their success, I probed further with comments such as, "Tell me more" or asked a question such as, "Who says things like that?" The focus group protocol for the dissertation is included in Appendix A. Table 1 below summarizes student's responses during the pilot field work.

Table 1*Summary of Pilot Study Student Responses to Focus Group Interview Questions*

Topics	Short Summary of Responses
Good student qualities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Completes homework • Asks questions in classes • Listens • Takes notes • Teachers pet • Quiet • Doesn't argue
What are you successful at in school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social Studies because she lets us listen to music while we work • Social Studies because she makes it fun • Science because we don't have to do worksheets the whole time, it's hands on
Study Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I like math because I am just good at working with numbers • I listen to music while I study, it helps me concentrate • I use index cards like flash cards • My mom quizzes me on stuff
Causes for students struggles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peers • They don't care • Their home life may be tough • Teachers don't believe in them
Peers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No influence • Some people want to look cool • I'm in a class with all White people • Peers don't influence me
How can Principal/Teachers help	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk to the teachers about how they treat us. Some teachers you can just feel don't like you • Get rid of ISS it's like jail and it's just filled with Black kids • Tell the teachers to let us listen to music while we work • Tell the teachers to stop with all the worksheets, we are a generation that likes technology, put it on a computer or tablet and you will gain our attention
Hindrances for Black males	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Image • Some don't want to be viewed as acting White • Bad home life • Their parents don't care • No role models or mentors

Methodology

As mentioned in Chapter One, I chose to use a basic qualitative inquiry, as described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), because it allowed me to examine African American students' school experiences. By conducting a basic qualitative research study, I did not try to prove cause-effect relationships. Nor did I try to make generalizations about the entire population of the county where I conducted my research. According to Merriam & Tisdell (2016), "basic qualitative research is used to learn how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 24). Qualitative researchers gather information that can be used to provide recommendations and strategies in the field of education. Qualitative researchers build from data that is "usually collected in naturalistic settings" (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 18). This research topic is appropriate for qualitative research because according to Marshall & Rossman (2011), "qualitative research is pragmatic, interpretive, and grounded in the lived experience of people" (p. 2). This research study covered all of these factors.

Research Questions

The following question and sub questions guide the design of this study: How do academically successful African American students from an economically vulnerable rural community perceive their schooling experiences?

- a. How do they define success?
- b. What do they perceive as contributing factors toward their academic success?
- c. What do they perceive as challenges to their academic success?

d. What advice do these students have for peers, educators, and family?

Through learning about the first-hand experiences of academically successful African American students from an economically vulnerable rural community, I hoped to provide school leaders with information about what these students perceive is contributing to their challenges and successes. I argue that we can learn much about effective school practices from students who have been historically minoritized.

Setting

Due to the current pandemic, my focus groups occurred via Zoom. The participants were students at Bloomsdale Middle School. Bloomsdale, as described in Chapter 1, is a small rural town. The school is located in an economically vulnerable community and serves a racially diverse population. The basic demographics of school are reported as being comprised of students who identify as: Hispanic: 28-31%; African American: 30-32%; White: 26-33% .

According to Table 2, of all the major subgroups, African American students struggle most, with a 35-percent-point gap between White and African American students. The underachievement of African American students is similar throughout the district. During the 2019-20 school year, Bloomsdale County Schools identified a need to increase African American student achievement district-wide and launched an initiative to make teachers more culturally responsive. Workshops and district conversations were centered around building teacher capacity to work with diverse groups of students, as well as utilizing culturally relevant teaching strategies in their classrooms. The school board also formed an equity and diversity committee, issued required implicit bias

training for all staff, and employed diversity consultants to provide administrators with professional development. All of these items were created in an attempt to support the need to increase multiculturalism throughout the district.

Table 2

Bloomsdale Middle School Student 2018-19 Reading EOG Proficiency Scores

Race	Grade Level Proficiency (Lvl 3&4)
African American	17.8
White	52.9
Hispanic	31.7
Multiracial	63.6

Note. Adapted from 2018-19 Released Bloomsdale County SPG Reports

Research Participants

For this study, the population was middle school African American boys and girls at Bloomsdale Middle School. I used purposeful, criterion-based sampling to select the participants. Approval was obtained from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct this research. An application was also submitted to the school district and was approved to recruit participants for the study. After district approval an email was sent to the principal of the middle school requesting access to their school and the criteria for participation. The principal connected me with the assistant principal to discuss my participant criteria. I shared my selection criteria with her, and she identified 30 students that met the criteria, 15 girls and 15 boys.

Drawing on the description offered by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), criterion-based selection involves sampling that directly reflects the purpose of the study. The sampling criteria that were used in this study was as follows:

1. African American students who attend Bloomsdale Middle School.
2. Academically successful students, as indicated by one or more of the following:
 - a. Academic performance or grades (Dean's List);
 - b. Qualify/attend Math 1 (Advanced Math), and or;
 - c. Reading proficiency (Scored level of 3, 4 or 5 on recent Reading EOG)

Out of the 30 identified participants, 13 agreed to participate. All participants selected their own pseudonym to help maintain privacy.

Table 3

Demographics of Participants

Pseudonym	Grade	Gender	Focus Group
Jill	7 th	female	Group 1
Danny	8 th	female	Group 1
Bball Girl	7 th	female	Group 1
Paris	6 th	female	Group 2
France	7 th	female	Group 2
Italy	8 th	female	Group 2
Lucille	6 th	female	Group 3
Athens	8 th	female	Group 3
Smith	7 th	female	Group 3
Cupcake Girl	6 th	female	Group 3
Jay	8 th	male	Group 4

DJ	6 th	male	Group 4
Sonic	6 th	male	Group 4

Data Collection

Once I was provided with contact information for the participants' parents, I emailed an informational flyer to them. To all families who expressed interest, I emailed parent consent forms as well as student assent forms. The consent form provided the parents with additional information about the study, why their child was asked to participate, how their child would participate and explained that their child could end their participation at any time if they felt necessary. All participants and their parents signed the consent forms and returned them back to me electronically.

I selected focus groups as the method by which I would answer my research questions. Utilizing focus groups allows for stimulated talk from multiple perspectives (Chambers & Huggins, 2014). Focus groups also encourage participants to share their perspectives in their own words and tell their own stories using their own language (Lichtman, 2013, p.195).

The focus groups took place via the Zoom platform and were recorded. In addition, a field log was used to record my observations and other notes. The participants were asked 14 open-ended questions to allow for rich discussion. The focus groups ranged from 60 to 90 minutes.

Data Storage and Anatomization

My data was organized in a binder that is stored in a locked cabinet that requires a key. All electronic information is stored in Box on a computer that is password protected.

All focus group interviews were recorded using Zoom. To ensure confidentiality, the saved recordings were destroyed after the focus group was transcribed. The participants selected their own pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. After all of the transcriptions were completed, I utilized the find and replace feature on the computer to replace the participants' real names with their selected pseudonyms. A key was made which identifies which pseudonym belongs to what student. This key is stored in a different place than the transcripts. Special care was taken with transcriptions, paper documents, and electronic documents. All data collection and storage followed the protocols established by the IRB and will be destroyed after 3 years.

Data Analysis

I used a transcription program to transcribe my focus group interviews, however after the transcriptions were received, I read over them numerous times while listening to the recordings to ensure accuracy. Once all the transcripts were transcribed verbatim, I began my coding process. Siedman (2013) suggests that qualitative researchers organize excerpts from their interview transcripts into categories and find patterns and connections between them. I followed this process by performing open coding. Open coding involves analyzing the transcript data to label important words/phrases. I utilized a color-coding process by assigning words/phrases a specific color. I then marked up the transcripts and colored similar words/phrases and labels. This process allowed me to easily see similarities and differences between the different participants' responses and identify the themes that emerged from the data. Four themes emerged from the focus group

interviews. They were stressors, racial identity, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and parental influence.

Trustworthiness/Ethical Considerations

Due to COVID-19 pandemic, my methods were limited to only focus group interviews via Zoom. However, the four focus group interviews provided me with data that allowed me to create common themes. However, I was unable to implement other aspects outlined in my proposal defense such as hands on writing and artistic activities with students. However, I used two strategies to bolster trustworthiness: a reflexivity journal and a peer reviewer.

I utilized reflexivity as a way for the research to be transparent. Reflexivity is the process by which the researcher reflects upon the data collection and interpretation process (Creswell, 2016). To engage in reflexivity, I wrote notes to myself as I conducted the focus group interviews. The notes allowed me to reflect later about the focus group interviews as I watched the recordings and analyzed the transcripts. My notes included suggestions for the next focus group interview based on student responses, areas where students had trouble answering and needed clarity and notes about the group dynamics. Below I provide an excerpt from my journal after my first focus group interview.

Figure 2

Excerpt From Reflexivity Journal

Group #1
page 2

all wanted to answer at once

5. Are African American academically successful students viewed differently by their peers?
6. Do you feel academically successful African American students are faced with challenges? *great discussion all girls*
7. Do you have any specific study strategies that you feel may have contributed to your academic success? *provided examples*
8. Although it would be great to be successful in school, not everyone is. What do you feel causes African American students to struggle in school? *peers, views, said*
9. Do you feel that peers influence if you will be successful or not? Why or why not? *faces on*
10. Do you feel that parents influence your success? *yes, yes, yes*
 - a. Do they ask you about your school day? What types of things do they ask you about school? *all agree*
 - b. Do they make you do homework every night? *yes*
11. What advice do you have for your peers on how to be academically successful in middle school? Family? Teachers? *Separate into different's spoke*
12. What problems or challenges have you had to deal with because you are academically successful? *only ask challenges next time*
13. Have you ever been the only African American student in an advanced class? How did that make you feel? *all agree, lonely common*
14. Have you ever had someone treat you badly or differently because you're smart? Tell me about that experience. *only one spoke, asked to wordy*

each to add something to ~~the~~ dialogue

Conclusion Text
Thank you for participating in today's focus group interview. As a reminder, I will be sharing the information learned during this session as a part of my dissertation, using your pseudonyms. If you think of any additional thoughts or comments that you would like to share, please contact me at adgoodle@uncg.edu

Group 2
idea B

Girls Not familiar w/ each other, ask if know each other next time

Silence after #5 inserted an example of my experiences being an AA student

9. Long discussion about peers → AA peers were a (+) ask about AA peer influence during next group

After about 3 questions the girls became comfortable with each other and began answering with less prompts.

I also solicited the help from a peer to serve as a peer reviewer who challenged my thinking and brought up new ideas that disrupted my initial assumptions and interpretations about my data. My peer reviewer was also a doctoral student and a school administrator. They were chosen because they also have an interest in rural African American students and conducted research on African American academic success. They were willing to give me honest feedback and engage me in relevant dialogue about current African American educational challenges. For example, when discussing what constitutes a student as being academically successful, my peer reviewer challenged my view of basing success solely on test scores. Indeed, student's academic success can be measured in many ways. Thus, I extended my definition of academic success after receiving this feedback. My peer reviewer also challenged my silence on discussing racial issues. After reflecting on the recent police killings of unarmed African Americans as well as considering feedback from both my peer reviewer as and a committee member, I saw the value in situating the study in the current socio-political climate of racial injustices.

I also continued to reflect upon my positionality beyond the traditional positionality statement that details how a researcher's background and position affect what they choose to investigate, the angle they take, the methods they use, the findings they offer, and the way the conclusions are presented (Malterud, 2001, pp. 483-484). As I conducted this research study, I continuously asked myself reflexive questions such as:

- 1) “What do I see?”
- 2) “How might others see it?”
- 3) “What is my purpose for doing what I am doing?”

I am confident that my study is ethical and appropriate. Also, due to not conducting research at my current school, my position as an administrator did not conflict or affect the student’s responses to the focus group interview questions. By using the trustworthiness techniques mentioned above I was able to make sure that the information was conveyed in a way that was ethical and appropriate. I also followed IRB protocol in providing parents and students with details about the study and informed consent forms.

(De) Limitations

While interviewing parents and teachers could prove helpful to studying the phenomenon of academically successful African American students from economically vulnerable rural communities, I chose to limit my interactions to only students. My goal was always to center the voices of students. My study is further delimited by my research approach. My purpose is to discover, understand, and describe rather than critique. Thus, I approached my data with an interpretive lens rather than using a critical theoretical lens.

In terms of limitations, it is important to note that the participant sample is not to be considered representative of all academically successful African American students in this school, county, or communities with similar characteristics. Moreover, the definition of “academically successful” is limited in that it does not account for all the ways students might show their intelligence or commitment to schooling. Thus, this study is limited in its ability to make generalizations to other sites. However, conclusions may be

transferable to other communities and recommendations modified according to particular contexts.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The goal of this study was to listen to the voices of students to discover what middle grade rural African American students perceived as contributing factors to their educational success. As discussed prior, students of color typically perform significantly lower than other racial student groups. In my professional and personal experiences, high performing African American students are looked upon as exceptions and outliers. In this study I highlight the voices of those “outliers.”. While the perspectives of students are rarely sought in critical conversations involving their educational experiences, since students are most impacted by school policies and procedures, they should be involved in the conversations focused on their educational success.

Through listening to the student’s discussions during the focus groups, I gained a greater awareness of the students’ educational experiences. Most experiences were good, but some were unpleasant. Throughout, the students’ responses and discussions with each other were so passionate and engaging. Regardless of the type of experiences shared, I included them all in my findings to allow for an accurate account of the student’s educational experiences. But first, I provide a brief overview of key ideas. I then explain each theme that emerged from the research data in greater detail, including a discussion of subthemes in each main category. I then conclude the chapter with a brief summary of my findings.

Brief Overview of Key Ideas

This basic qualitative study focused on academically successful African American rural middle school students from an economically vulnerable community and sought to investigate how they perceived their schooling experiences. Through focus group interview discussions this study also uncovered challenges faced by rural African American students as they strive to reach their academic goals. In the section to follow I will describe the four themes that emerged from the data in detail with student responses. However, for the purpose of an introduction to my findings, I will share a brief overview of my key insights. After analyzing my focus group interview data, four key ideas emerged from my data. All of the focus group interview discussions involved conversation around the following ideas, these key ideas became my thematic sections:

1. Stressors
2. Racial Identity
3. Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation
4. Parental Influence

The first theme that will be addressed in this chapter is African American middle school students from the study have to navigate added stressors to maintain academic success. Being African American and successful can oftentimes bring unnecessary stress. Academically successful African American students are expected, like all students, to balance their personal lives and academics. However, participants in this study have experienced stress due to the workload that is associated with their advanced classes. They must also overcome stress created by pressure placed on them from teachers and

parents. Students want to please their parents and teachers; however, maintaining their high-performance standard can be stressful at times.

The second theme discussed in this chapter is that most participants in this study have had to establish their racial identity. Being an academically successful African American can not only be stressful, but also come at a cost. Some of the participants in this study discussed experiencing psychosocial costs and representation costs due to their academic success. Being the only or among only a few other African American students in their advanced class, the participants reported feeling lonely. Others mentioned struggles with being able to fit in and discovering what their racial identity is due to feeling like a misfit. The burden of feeling as though you have to represent your whole race and have no room for mistake is an extreme cross some of the participants are carrying.

The third theme that is discussed in this chapter is student motivation. It was evident through the focus group interview discussions that all participants in this study are both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated to be academically successful. Some of the participants expressed their internal drive which pushes them to have a desire to continue to push themselves and perform well in school. Others discussed some of the extrinsic motivators, such as honor roll celebrations that provided them with a reward for performing well in schools. Parents were also mentioned as a motivating factor to do well in school.

Parental involvement is the last theme that is discussed in this chapter. All participants in this study have parents that play an active role in their education. The

conversations that occurred during the focus group interviews were very informative about how parents have supported and influenced their child's success in school. The type of parental involvement differed among the participants. Some had parents that played a more active role at school, while others have working parents that play a more active role at home. Despite the type of parental involvement each participant experienced, they were all appreciative and valued their parent's involvement in their education.

Focus Group Interview Composition

The dynamics of each focus group interview group was unique. However, similarly all of the participants in the groups were very articulate and answered the questions with great thought. Although the participants are in middle school, they responded to the questions as well as I would have expected an adult to answer. The students all attended Bloomsdale Middle School, however because some groups were composed of students in different grade levels, they did not all know each other.

Table 4*Focus Group Dynamics*

Focus Group 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The participants did not know each other • Slow to answer questions at first, took time after 5th question to ask questions about the participants so that they could get to know each other • Silence after answer was given • Had to be prompted to answer questions after they were asked, however when they answered the questions their answers were very insightful
Focus Group 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All participants knew each other • The girls were very chatty and seemed very comfortable answering the questions • When a question was asked the girls would agree with each other • A lot of small talk occurred between the questions • I had to refocus the group a few times during the focus group interview • The girls started talking over each other at times and I had to review the rules of taking turns to speak • Very positive atmosphere, all girls were smiling and talking
Focus Group 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three participants knew each other • The three participants that knew each other were chatty at first, but once they realized Cupcake (who they did not previously know) was not talking, one of the participants asked her what she thought about school and invited her into the conversation
Focus Group 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The participants did not know each other, but had similar teachers at some point in their schooling experience at Bloomsdale • Very willing to talk to me and answer all the questions • Talked with each other about interests and experiences • Jay took on a leadership role and provided academic advice to the other participants, he was the first to answer every question • Open and rich dialogue

The focus group interviews were the method utilized to capture the students' voice and were very successful. However, I was faced with a few challenges as documented in Table 4. Some of the students were shy and reluctant to share at first, this may have been due to the students not feeling comfortable sharing outlier perspectives with strangers. There were times during the focus group interviews when I had to recenter the group that comprised participants that knew each other, because they wanted to discuss other things at times. Some groups were very chatty while other groups needed additional prompts. However, overall, all the participants provided very insightful information that allowed me to understand their rural schooling experiences as high-achieving Black students.

Analytical Themes

Theme 1: These African American middle school students have to navigate added stressors to maintain academic success

Before starting this research study, I was under the false presumption that students that are academically successful enjoy school. After conducting research which included the theory of racial opportunity costs, I began to understand that African American students that are academically successful often experience costs for obtaining this success. This theory was confirmed by my focus group interviews. Several of my student participants expressed that school was stressful or discussed aspects of their school experience that created stressors. During the focus group interviews some participants voiced their concern with stress that can be created by school. Jill elaborated on her thoughts of school after giving a loud sigh:

When I think of school homework and stress are the first things that come to my mind. Like I have to do a good job, I don't have any other choice. In order to get into college and have a good life you have to do well in school. That's a huge burden that kids like me have to carry, but we have to do it. Teachers don't realize that we are kids and by assigning us all that homework, it doesn't leave time for us to be kids. We do have lives outside of school you know.

Danny who was also in Jill's focus group interview expressed a similar perspective to Jill's. She also felt that school brought on a lot of stress that should not be present while in middle school. She discussed that she spends several hours a day on homework. She explained that she experiences anxiety before a class if she feels that she didn't spend enough time studying the night before. During our discussion she said:

Doing well is an expectation from my parents. I come home and do my homework every night. Sometimes I have to stay up late and work on assignments and study. School can be stressful, especially if I don't get a chance to study enough before class. It doesn't help that I am a worrier. I want to do the best I can. My parents expect it and I expect it for myself.

Jay had a similar response as he reflected about his school experience. Although Jay has been academically successful in school. He spoke of not enjoying school. He elaborated on how it was stressful and even voiced that school was a waste of time. Jay spoke with passion as he asserted his opinions about his school experience. You could almost hear the hurt in his voice as he spoke.

School is a waste of time. It's so stressful to learn stuff that you will not use in real life. I wish that you could just go to school and learn the Basics. Once you know the basics you should be taught what you need to know to get a job in the area you want. I have had teachers that did not like me and that didn't help matters. Luckily, I am smart so even though school is stressful, I still make A's.

The students identified several school stressors that are related to racial opportunity cost. In my theoretical framework section of Chapter 1, I explained the racial opportunity cost theory. During the focus group interviews, I discovered that several of the students expressed experiencing costs that they have endured for being African American academically successful students. Some students expressed these experiences more than others; however, they all discussed some aspect of this concept. The two components of the racial opportunity cost theory that was reflected the most in the student's responses was psychosocial costs and representation costs.

Psychosocial Costs

Psychosocial costs reflect the impact of racialized school cultures on the interplay of a student's psychological well-being within the social context of the school environment, these costs are the most personal for students (Chambers et al., 2014). The students expressed this cost the most during my focus group interview discussions by their responses of feeling lonely and isolated. Several students spoke of being bothered by being the only African American student in their advanced courses when asked, "Have you ever been the only African American student in an advanced class?" Egypt expressed feeling isolated from her same-race peers which caused her to not have a lot of African American close friends.

I never really thought that it bothered me being the only African American in my advanced language arts course until one day the teacher made a comment that I felt was racist. I wanted to talk to my friends about how it offended me but then I realized that they were White and probably wouldn't understand. For the rest of the school year I felt so lonely and out of place being in that class. I was also sad because I didn't have any Black kids to talk to that would understand me.

Athens also expressed this sense of isolation being the only African American student in her advanced math course. Athens spoke of how she was shy and quiet in class. She rarely answered a question or spoke among her other classmates.

I was so quiet, I don't think I really realized how like weird I felt about it (being the only African American student in class) until like the end of the year, because I didn't look like everyone else. I felt like I didn't fit in with anybody in class.

Italy expressed her loneliness and isolation based on her same race peer interactions. Italy spoke about not being able to join lunchroom conversations or have small talk with her same race peers due to not being in the same classes as them.

I feel so out of place sometimes when I am with my friends. They will talk about stuff that happened during their classes that I don't know anything about because I don't have classes with them. I can't join into the conversation, so I am left just sitting there looking crazy.

Being the only African American student in advanced classes was a racial opportunity cost these students had to pay for being academically successful. The students also discussed the stress of having to perform well to demonstrate academic success for their race. This stressor can be classified as a representation cost.

Representation Costs

Being a middle school student is already a difficult time for many students, but this situation can be magnified if you feel that you have the weight of a whole race on your shoulders. When asked “Are African American academically successful students viewed differently by their peers?” some students expressed aspects of representation cost. The students spoke of how teachers and peers often viewed or treated them

differently. Lucille expressed this clearly as she spoke about a past teacher. Lucille said, “I had a teacher that I knew didn’t think I was supposed to be in her advanced class.” I asked her to elaborate on this by telling me what made her feel this way and how did she know this was the case with this teacher. Lucille explained,

She would call me out even if others had their hands up to answer questions that were challenging and say things like, you probably don’t know but give it a shot or if I raised my hand to answer a question she wouldn’t call on me. After a test you made a comment one time and said that there are people that are lucky to be in this class, and looked at me as she said it. I know she was talking about me. She didn’t like me because I am Black and I worked even harder to prove that Black people are smart too.

This comment by Lucille sparked others to comment about similar experiences. Some stated that teachers made them feel like they didn’t belong, while others spoke of peer experiences. Italy spoke directly about a peer experience that involved representation costs. She discussed how her and another African American student in her advanced math class team up and formed a camaraderie to perform well. Italy illustrated a first day of school experience:

On the first day of school in one of my advanced classes another Black girl sat near me. We formed a bond and partnered with each other all the time. We studied and helped each other when one of us didn’t get it. It’s like we couldn’t let the other one fail, we were the only ones in the class. That would look bad.

For some participants, their representation costs manifested in the form of feeling that all eyes were on them to perform well for their race. Although Italy did not directly state it, both of these girls felt that they had to work hard together. When she said, “it would look bad” I imply that she felt that by being the only two African American

students in this class, created an environment that created them to represent all Black students. If they performed badly it would look poorly on their race. Sadly, Italy took on the representation cost of feeling that she was a representation of her whole race. That is a tough burden to carry as a middle school student. Not all of the participants however dealt with stressors. Cupcake spoke about school bringing her happiness. She expressed that she had a strong support system and even when she did encounter stressors, she had a strong friend group that supported her and parents. Although Cupcake is a 6th grader, she spoke with such wisdom and confidence.

Being a smart Black girl is tough at times, but I think it's worse if you have a bad home life and make poor friend choices. If you don't have parents supporting, you and friends that aren't focused on academics you will fail. I face stressful situations everyday but I try my best to focus on the positive and stay motivated to be successful. When I come home my parents always encourage me to keep going. I am able to talk to them and get advice about different situations.

Smith also explained that she is faced with stressors in school but her friend group helps support her success as an African American student. She discussed that she has a group of friends that are also African American, she stated that some are in advanced classes with her and others aren't. Despite if they are in her classes or not she explained that they all support each other and encourage each other's success. She did state that she believes students that have a friend group that are not supportive of their academic success, are not as academically successful. Smith discussed that students experience stress in school because of their friend group. She expressed:

I think stress in school is definitely dependent on your friend group, because if you have friends that are supportive, then you're obviously going to do better. But

if you have friends that don't really care about you or just want you for like certain personalities or qualities that you have, and not for you being your actual self, then you're most likely to fail because of the negative impact they have on you.

Cupcake girl and Smith so eloquently explain that although successful African American students may face many stressors, such as racial opportunity costs, if they have a strong support system, they can overcome them.

Theme 2: Most participants in this study have had to negotiate a complex and multifaceted racial identity

During all of the focus group interviews a discussion around struggles with racial identity and whiteness evolved when I asked, "What problems or challenges have you had to deal with because you are academically successful?" I gathered from some participants that they struggle to maintain what they feel is "acting Black" while still performing well in school. This became a lengthy discussion during my boys focus group interview. All of the boys during the focus group interview discussed their struggles with "acting Black." Sonic discussed that he made sure to not use Ebonics when he spoke. He also explained that he dressed differently in school than he would at home or on the weekends. DJ explained that as he stands in line waiting to enter his advanced class, he has a routine of tucking his shirt and tightening his belt before entering. I further engaged him in this conversation to understand why he did these things.

Advanced students look and act differently than the other kids. I don't want to be viewed differently by my advanced friends. I pull my shirt out when I leave the class because I don't want to lose respect from my boys. I have an image to maintain.

During some of the other focus group interviews, some participants explained that they were unsure how they should act, which created an internal struggle within themselves around their racial identity. Others clearly explained the dynamics of social structures within schools and how they navigate racial identity.

Psychologists have consistently identified racial identity as an important construct related to psychosocial outcomes for African Americans, including self-esteem and attitude toward education (Elion, Wang, Slaney, & French, 2012). It was uncovered from my focus group interviews that there was a divide in the student's regarding racial identity. Some students embraced their race and culture, while others struggled to establish a racial identity. Racial identity has been studied for many years; I define it based on a dated but still valid definition. Racial identity is a person's psychological orientation towards their racial group (Carter & Goodwin, 1994).

Everyone belongs to a racial group; however, everyone differs in his or her psychological identification with his or her racial group. Sonic explained that school influences student's psychological identification of their racial identities. He spoke of the hidden school culture that you must learn to navigate in order to be successful. He discussed that school makes non-White racial groups appear to be inferior. He explained that schools help to create the notion of acting White and acting Black. Sonic explained that acting White is following the hidden school rules that make you successful, while acting Black creates negative thoughts and unsuccessful. Danny offered a different explanation for what acting Black and acting White means to her.

When you act White you are quiet and don't try to draw attention to your Self. White people are chill. But when you act Black, most of the time you are loud and outspoken. You can be Black and be successful as long as you know when to turn it off, like class is not the time to be loud and stuff. You can do all that when you are with your crew.

Jay made it clear that despite what others thought of him, he was proud to be a successful Black student. He explained how he saw Black students code switch, which he defined as acting one way around White people and a different way around Black people. He explained in essence his understanding of White-normed expectations for speech, dress, and behavior that is seen by the majority as the acceptable way, however he discussed he chooses to act independent of these norms. Jay stated,

I know that it's expected that because I am in advanced classes I should act like White people. But why? I am Black. I am going to act the way I act. You shouldn't have to change who you are to fit into the norm. I am respectful and listen to the teacher, but I don't necessarily act White.

Paris also expressed an understanding of the unspoken White-normed expectations that are often imposed on successful African American students. She explained that because of her mom she chooses to be eccentric and proudly embrace her race and culture while at school. Paris spoke with great enthusiasm as she described what it looks like to be a successful student, she even put up her fist when she was done speaking and yelled out, "I am Black and I'm proud." Paris states:

My mom taught me to be happy to be Black. I know that everyone thinks that the White way is the right way, but you can be successful and not be White. Look at me. I have natural hair and Black people clothes. I am proud of who I am. I wish that teachers and other adults in school didn't make a big deal about race, then more people would be true with who they are. I am Black and I'm proud.

Jay and Paris are two examples of students that are aware of the White-normed expectations of school, however they have learned to navigate them and still achieve academic success. Not all participants in the focus group have been as successful in establishing their racial identity.

Bball girl discussed that she has struggled with her racial identity. She said that she has felt like she was White because she is academically successful. Well, I kinda have a hard time in school sometimes. Because I am smarter I feel like I am viewed as whitewashed. I don't know why, but it's really weird. It happens really frequently, which is kinda sad, but yeah. It doesn't matter how I act or feel, other people think I identify more with White people because I am smart.

Bball girl goes on to explain that other students also struggle with their racial identities and intentionally try not to be successful because they do not want to be viewed as White.

Like some Black kids try to purposefully fail tests or do bad on assignments because they want the other Black kids to like them more. I just don't understand that. I would much rather be viewed as being White than to fail a test on purpose.

Jill also explained her struggle with her racial identity. During the focus group interview when I asked are academically African American students faced with challenges, Jill explained distinctions in racial groups that she has noticed since elementary school. Jill discussed that because of these distinctions she has always struggled with what group she fit in with the best, because of this she said that she just stays to herself. Jill talked about her experiences:

Since 3rd grade I have noticed that the Black kids are always loud and also clowning around. I never had many Black kids in my class, mainly just White students. Maybe that's why I didn't act like the other Black kids because I didn't

have them in my classes. I feel bad though because I want to be identified as a Black kid, not a kid that acts White.

I asked Jill to further explain why she didn't feel that she was identified as Black, she explained a situation that happened to her last year. She discussed that she always raised her hands and asked questions. If the class got too loud, she would ask the teacher if she could go in the hallway to complete her assignments because it was quieter and always aimed to get good grades. One day Jill said that she was confronted by one of her Black peers.

One of the Black girls in the class asked me why do I ask so many questions. She went on and on about how I was a know it all and show off. She then told me that I just want to be White. It really bothered me because I wasn't trying to be White, I was just being myself. That's when I really realized that I didn't act like most of the other Black kids in my school. I didn't know where I fit in.

Jill further discussed that as a result of her success in school she was viewed as White. As explained in Chambers et al. (2014), "regardless of her personal racial identity or how she had expressed that racial identity, she became White simply because she engaged the White space of the advanced classes in which she enrolled" (p.488).

Theme 3: All participants in this study are both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated to be academically successful

I discovered from this study that all of the participants were motivated to be academically successful. While they were all motivated, it became apparent based on the discussions during the focus group interviews that they were all motivated in different

ways. The two types of motivations I identified were intrinsic and extrinsic. Each participant spoke of the different factors that served as motivators for their success.

Intrinsic Motivation

Participants expressed factors such as self-image and an internal desire to want to be successful as intrinsic motivators. When the participants were asked, what successful students look like and what qualities successful students possess the students described themselves. Every student explained that academically successful African American students were attentive in class, they asked questions when they did not understand and had good study habits. As the students discussed these qualities, they used language that made it evident they were discussing themselves rather than general examples of what contributes to academic success. Several students also described the view that others have of them that serve as a motivation for their academic success. Sonic explained:

Students that are smart and do well in school study hard and listen to their teachers in school. When you are successful you learn to get in the habit of doing the same thing over and over to continue to be successful.

When I further probed for him to describe what successful students look like, he responded by saying, “they look like me.” He further discussed,

Successful students look like me. When you are a successful student you have like an image that you must maintain. But it’s different because you don’t care about what the other kids think of you, it’s just like you behave in class and listen. You don’t get in trouble or draw bad attention to yourself.

Jay added to this discussion by saying,

I agree with Sonic, even though I don't care what other people think of me and I do my own thing. I guess if you were on the outside looking in you would say that all of us have a similar image. We all are kinda the same as far as image.

During three focus group interviews, the girls discussed their desire to want to do well. Athens discussed that even though no one tells her to, she feels like she has a drive inside her to do well in school. She described it as an internal push to study hard and achieve academic success so that she can go to college. Paris also described that she has an internal drive to be academically successful. Paris discussed that she has always been successful in school, she described that in her household it was an unspoken expectation that you have to do well in school. This expectation has created what she described as her expectation for herself to perform well in school. Paris stated, "no one in my family tells me to do well in school, but I know that it's expected. I just am driven by my own mind to do well in school."

Jill discussed that not being academically successful in school was not an option for her. She explained that she is motivated by her success. Jill elaborated with the following statement,

I am motivated by my success, because every time I get a good grade, it pushes me to want to do even better next time. My mom says I am my worst enemy, because I am always pushing myself to do better next time. I guess you can say it's my drive.

As discussions extended on student's internal drives I asked the participants, are some African American middle school students unsuccessful academically because they lack drive? The students that contributed to this discussion all said yes. Lucille explained that

your internal drive is what pushes you to be successful. She further elaborated,

I think what separates students as successful and not successful is their motivation. No one can make you do anything, you either want to do well or not. It's like just in you to want to do well or not.

It was discussed that some of the students are intrinsically motivated to perform well because they like the challenge that advanced classes bring. Other students expressed liking to see themselves make growth. Italy discussed how her advanced English teacher made the class chart their progress on tests and other assignments so that they could see their growth. She spoke of how satisfying it was to see her line graph increase as she improved.

My AIG language arts teacher made us attach graphs in our notebooks. At the beginning of each unit we take pretests on concepts, then we have check ins through the unit and of course a post test at the end. After we take our quizzes and test, we mark the score on our graphs. I don't know but it makes me so happy to know that I am growing.

Extrinsic Motivation

All the students were asked to describe some things that have helped their success in school. During all of the focus group interviews each participant seemed to enjoy contributing to the discussion about their extrinsic motivators. During the first focus group interview Jill, Danny and Bball Girl had an active discussion about how their teachers were what contributed to their academic success. When I asked the students what advice they had for their teachers they discussed how their relationships with their students influence their participation and success in school. Jill discussed that when

teachers give rewards and praise to their students, that helps to motivate them to be successful in their class. Danny and Bball Girl also added that this was a motivator for their success as well. The students also discussed games and instructional strategies teachers used that motivated them.

Jill: Mrs. Rainy was my favorite teacher. She was the one of the reasons I am successful. She lets us play games when we finish our assignments in time. Her competitions are so fun. We compete for the top spot and get to be the queen or king of the week. It makes everyone want to perform well so that you can get recognized. I love to go to her class because I know she is going to find a way to make our history class fun.

Danny: I have a teacher like that too. If we finish all of our work before the bell rings. My teacher lets us listen to music. The clean version of course! It motivates everybody to want to do well. Nobody slacks because you don't want to be the hold up from everybody else not being able to listen to music. Everybody likes him because he cares about us and tries to get to know us. He is the only teacher I know that actually tries to understand us.

Bball Girl: I had a teacher that was like what you all talked about. I will never forget when she did the get loose challenge with us. She knew all the moves. Teachers need to know that that kind of stuff motivates us to do well in their class. When you relate to us and try to get to know our culture. I tried extra hard in her class because I didn't want to let her down.

All three ladies spoke about how positive teacher behavior influenced them to be academically successful. But this was not all of the participants' attitudes toward teachers. Jay spoke about how one of his past teachers motivated him to be academically successful because of her negative behavior towards him.

I had a teacher that I really disliked. She was my English teacher and I felt that she always tried to get me in trouble since the first day of school. Like if you miss breakfast at home you can get it at school. So one day I went to the breakfast line

but it was long and I had to take my breakfast to class after I got it. I ate it at my desk and the teacher called the office and was like, he's eating food in my class. Where else am I supposed to eat it, out in the hallway? I overheard her having a conversation about me not needing to be in her class and that she was going to move me to a lower literacy level, even though I'm reading at a good level. Oh my gosh I think it just stemmed from not turning in one assignment on time. I got an A in her class though because I was set to prove her wrong that I was dumb. Her negativity motivated me to do well.

DJ offered empathy for Jay's past situation by discussing how teachers could motivate students to perform better in their classes and get the outcomes they ultimately want if they would work to make their classes enjoyable.

We need more teachers that care about students and their jobs. I feel like if there were more teachers who cared about their job and cared about helping students, I feel like there'd be more students who would like to come to school and perform better. Making class more enjoyable motivates us. I don't know why, but in middle school they got rid of like parties and stuff like that. It's just the small things that make classroom time enjoyable. Those pizza parties and things that happen all the time in elementary school, still work to motivate middle schoolers too.

During my second focus group interview the students discussed how honor roll celebrations served as a motivating factor to their success. At Bloomsdale Middle School, academic awards are celebrated school wide with special events prepared for A/B and A honor roll. The ladies discussed their feelings towards these special events. Lucille and Athens were the most vocal about their experiences with the events. Lucille started the discussion by saying:

I know that you should get good grades because colleges look at your grades and that determines your future, but I will be honest I really work towards being able to participate in the A honor roll events. So each quarter if you made all A's you get a catered lunch and get to go on a special field trip. We have gone bowling in

the past, a college campus and the beach. We get called out of class and get to eat our lunch in the library. It's really cool. I made a B in Math one quarter and I was devastated because I didn't get to go to the event. That only happened once because not being able to participate was like torture. There was no way I was going to let that happen again.

Athens added:

I agree with you Lucille. I did the same thing. I made a B and couldn't go; I was so hurt. It sucks we can't do it now because of Covid, but that was something that you worked toward each quarter. It may seem stupid to some people but that's motivating to be able to go off campus. I know you should do well just because it's the right thing to do, but that added incentive for performing well is nice to have and work to earn.

Theme 4: All participants in the study have parents that play an active role in their education

During each focus group interview the students were asked about parental involvement as it relates to their academic success. Several of the participants discussed accountability required by their parents and high expectations for academic success. It was clear that parents were a key factor in the students' academic success. It was also apparent that parents played an active role in their child's education through their push for their children to succeed and through their active involvement at home. Several students spoke about knowing their parent's desires for them to succeed in school, which is what drives them to do well in school each day. Jill explained that she did not want to let her dad down by performing poorly in math. She said, "He works so hard for me and wants me to do well in school, I can't let him down."

It was evident that the participants' parents were involved in their education

through asking questions about school and assisting them with their homework. During all of the focus group interviews participants spoke highly about their parent's involvement in their education. I asked the participants what they felt had the most influence on their academic success. Lucille was the first to respond in her group with the following:

I think probably my parents, because they always like tell me to work hard and like help me with my schoolwork and stuff. If they don't know how to do something they will Google and look stuff up to help me. My mom and dad always say that they learned math differently when they went to school, but they still help me.

As Lucille spoke Athens nodded her head in agreement as Lucille spoke about her parents. Athens later added, "I think basically what she [Lucille] said. My parents push me and encourage me. If I didn't have their support and encouragement, I think school would be so stressful." Smith added to the discussion between Lucille and Athens as well, adding, "After I get home from school every day, my parents ask me how my day was and like what I've learned and stuff. They always check my grades and email my teachers with questions."

Other students in my study also considered their parents having a big influence on their academic success. During one of my focus group interviews, the ladies discussed how their parents stay informed and involved with their school work. Below is a snippet of their discussion, Danny discussed:

My parents are always on top of things if I am not. So if I didn't notice something and they did, they will ask me stuff like, how do you feel that you did on this assignment or what was going on that day when you missed a question on an

assignment. They will ask me if they need to contact the teacher and they will, too, to make sure that I am paying attention in class and on track.

And then Jill commented with the following:

For me, uh, my dad, uh, he's really good with math. So during math homework, he takes extra time to help me out. My mom looks over my work too. They make sure that I do my homework every night. It's not an option.

Similarly, Bball Girl added to the discussion:

Mine always check on me. They're like, okay, how's school. Like the first thing my dad does when he comes home from work is ask me about school. My mom's always making sure that I had a good school day and they're always trying to make sure that they're doing everything they can to make school as nice and as motivational they can for me.

Jill ended the discussion about parents by saying:

The same for me, my dad motivates me. uh, my dad, has been a little more active in my school lately than my mom because my mom goes into work but my dad teleworks from home. Really if it wasn't for our parents, we probably wouldn't be doing as well as we are.

Although the boys focus group interview involved a discussion about their parents' involvement, the tone was quite different from the girls' discussions. The boys discussed their parents' involvement as being more authoritative. Jay explained that his mom does not play. He talked about being scared of his mom and what she may do to him if he didn't perform well in school. Jay began the discussion by sharing:

I am scared of my mom. She doesn't play when it comes to school. I know better than to act up in class and not get good grades. I don't think she will hurt me or

nothing but I just don't want to miss up and see what she will do. One time I got a C and I got the longest lecture ever and was grounded and couldn't watch T.V. that was terrible. Can you imagine not being able to watch T.V for a week?

Sonic added,

Yeah man. I know what you're talking about. My parents don't play either. Bring a bad grade home if you want too. Failing is not an option in my house. When I get home my parents expect me to do my homework and if I don't have any, they will create some for me. My mom is on the PTA and is always at the school, so I definitely can't act up. All the teachers know her and she has come to my class a lot to volunteer and stuff. I got caught talking in class one time and the teacher called my mom to the room. She came into the class and gave me that look. Shoot I was so scared, I thought she was going to whoop me in class. That was the last time I ever got in trouble in class.

DJ followed Sonic's comment with the following:

My mom is like Jay's. I have no other choice but to do well in school. My mom is signed up with PowerSchool on her phone and every time my teachers post a grade her phone gets an alert. She checks that thing faithfully. I don't get how students can do bad in class. They must have parents that don't care.

Jay and Sonic nodded in agreement with Jay's comment. Sonic added, "Yes, they must not care."

The research participants exchanged views on the types of parental involvement that was most influential to them. When I asked the students what advice they had for families on how to encourage academic success in their students, the participants had varying opinions. All of the participants answered this question by using what worked for their success. Some thought that parents should take more of a hands off approach and make themselves available for support and guidance. While others felt that parents

checking in with their child every day to discuss their school day was a contributor to their academic success. Jay elaborated more about his mother volunteering at the school and being actively involved in his school activities as what contributed to his academic success. The richest discussion however came from one of my girl's focus group interviews. Paris, France and Italy were all very vocal about advice to parents on contributing to students' academic success. France was the first to respond, she said:

I want all the parents to know that we still need them. Just because we are in middle school, that doesn't mean that we don't want them to ask about our day or help us with our homework. My parents do all of that and if they didn't I don't know what would motivate me to do it [homework]. Teachers are important but parents are more important.

Paris expanded this discussion by saying,

It's like whenever you were in elementary school your parents would like to come to the school and volunteer with class parties and stuff. Schools kind of cut that out in middle school and make it hard for parents to be involved at school. But parents can still be involved at home. Like what France said, helping with homework and talking to us about school is being involved too. That's what my parents do too, help me with my homework and that helps me to get good grades.

Italy added,

My parents help add to what I learn in school. I have tons of books at home and whenever I finish a set they get more for me. They help me study and quiz me on material. I love science so my parents bought me a microscope and we go around and find things to look at under it on the weekends sometimes. School is always talked about in my house. My advice to parents is to find ways to make learning fun at home so that when their child gets to school, they will already have a head start on what they will learn in school. That's what worked for me.

The student discussions outlined in this section support that parents play a huge role in the success of their children. It also highlights that parental involvement can look different for each family. This discussion confirms as well that parental involvement does not always constitute volunteering in the classroom to have an impact on student success.

Summary of Findings

Although similar outwardly, each research participant provided a unique perspective and interpretation of their educational experiences. Through this research study I experienced firsthand accounts of the students' school experiences. They discussed their successes in education, motivators, racial struggles and other factors that contributed to their academic success. Throughout, the students were enthusiastic participants. The focus group interviews provided an opportunity for the students to discuss stressors that influenced their academic performance. It was shown that students feel stressed at times with school due to factors such as homework. Some participants also found navigating the hidden norms and expectations of school stressful. Being a high achieving African American student and identifying a racial identity was a struggle for some of the participants. This chapter explained two types of motivators for students, intrinsic and extrinsic. Teacher awards and honor celebrations were examples of extrinsic motivators for the students. Personal growth and feeling accomplished are types of intrinsic motivators students discussed. Lastly, the students in the study discussed how their parents influence their academic success. Each participant expressed their parent's involvement in their education as being meaningful and important to reinforce proper study habits and homework completion.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This research study sought to investigate African American rural students from economically vulnerable communities. The aim was to determine their schooling experiences. I used student voice to tell the stories of the academically successful rural African American students. The study highlighted how the African American student participants perceived their educational experiences, as well as how they defined their success. An extensive review of literature uncovered that despite several efforts nationally to increase academic success of African American students, African American students continue to be one of the lowest performing sub-groups in schools across the nation. I feel an increased urgency for educators to be vigilant in supporting African American student's academic achievement, especially those from poverty.

I have participated in countless professional development sessions over the years that aimed to enlighten me on how to effectively teach African American students from poverty, but none of these trainings elicited student voice as a data source. Instead, the majority of the professional development sessions took on a deficit-based approach, insinuating that Black students were a problem that needed to be fixed. These professional developments, although intended to be useful, often delivered content that supported negative assumptions about the intellectual abilities of African American students.

I am a strong believer as an African American that African American students should be described positively and perceived appropriately. As expressed by Redeaux (2011), “I am a Black youth. I teach Black youth. I am attentive to the way these youths are described, portrayed, perceived. Because I teach ‘these children.’ And I am one of ‘these children.’” (p. 177)

Students are the greatest stakeholders in a school; therefore, much attention should be focused on their needs. Student voice is an effective way to determine student needs. It is particularly important to engage historically marginalized populations, such as African American students from low-income communities in discussions about their education. Following this philosophy, I was able to capture the thoughts, perceptions, and experiences of 13 middle school African American students who have been identified as academically successful. The overarching research question that guided this study was: How do academically successful African American students from an economically vulnerable rural community perceive their schooling experiences?

The supporting questions for this study were:

- a. How do African American students from an economically vulnerable rural community define success?
- b. What do African American students from an economically vulnerable rural community perceive as contributing factors toward their academic success?
- c. What do African American students from an economically vulnerable rural community perceive as challenges to their academic success?

- d. What advice do African American students from an economically vulnerable rural community have for their peers, educators, and family?

Four major themes emerged from conducting 4 focus group interviews: stressors, racial identity, motivation, and parental involvement. In Chapter 4, I provided verbatim quotes from the participants' responses to illuminate those emergent themes. In this chapter, I discuss the answers to the research sub questions in greater detail. I also share insight and recommendations for professional practice based on the implications of this study. In addition, I share recommendations for future research. I conclude this chapter with a reflection on what I learned by completing this dissertation.

Discussion of Research Questions

How do African American students from an economically vulnerable rural community define success?

The data collected from the focus group interviews indicated that the participants had similar perceptions on the meaning of academic success. First, the participants associated academic success with working hard in school that resulted in achieving good grades. Specifically, their responses to this question focused more on what success looked like and/or behavioral characteristics rather than a definition. Second, the participants perceived a successful student as well behaved. A student that is focused on the lesson, an active participant in class discussions and not afraid to ask questions were common descriptors given by the participants when defining academic success. This finding supports previous research by Williams & Portman (2014) that African American students associate academic success with having a strong sense of self-worth and

confidence. The African American students in the study also attributed academic success with the ability to utilize strategies to enhance their focus and learning.

Several participants also associated academic success with future goals and positive life outcomes. The findings uncovered that most of the participants had a desire to perform well in school in order to go to college, which in turn would lead to higher paying jobs and a better life. The desire to participate and achieve in advanced classes was a shared goal for several of the students for varying reasons, such as to make their parents proud, for college aspirations, and as testament that economic circumstances can be overcome. Researchers such as Hurd, Sanchez, Zimmerman, & Caldwell (2012) agree that academically successful African American students feel education was a gateway for increasing social and economic mobility.

Students that participated in the focus group interviews also discussed that they were motivated, although in different ways to be academically success. As discussed in Chapter Four, students were both motivated intrinsically and/or extrinsically to achieve academic success. A common response was that parents were the driving force for being successful in school. Some participants expressed fear of parental consequences for not achieving success. Yet others had a desire to be successful in order to make their parents proud because several parents did not attain academic success. A few participants discussed their motivation for academic success as a way to escape their current environment. Research supports that a large number of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds typically have poor academic achievement, however poor students are able to overcome this and demonstrate high academic achievement (Archambault, Janosz,

Morizot, & Pagani, 2009). The participants of this study are examples of this, they had a strong self-image and believed in their abilities to succeed despite their current economic circumstances.

What do African American students from an economically vulnerable rural community perceive as contributing factors toward their academic success?

Students shared four major contributing factors to their academic success, including: parents, instructional strategies, teacher relationships and peer influences. Research supports the findings that effective instructional strategies contribute to the success of African American students. Instruction that is meaningful, rigorous and data-driven have proven to promote the greatest academic success for African American students (Pitre, 2019; Fisher & Crawford, 2020).

Role of Parents

Participant responses drew me to the conclusion that parents were one of the most influential contributors to students' academic success. As shown in the study by McCoy, Wolf, & Godfrey's (2014), parent's values and feelings of education assist in shaping student's levels of intrinsic motivation. The students described how their parents encouraged them, supported their academic achievements and set high expectations for their academic performance. The participants articulated a connection between their parents' involvement in school and their academic success. Several students discussed peers that were not successful in school and contributed it in part to not having parents at home holding them accountable. As highlighted in Chapter 2, African American student perform well in school when they have encouraging parents that display interest in their

school assignments (Bailey & Paisley, 2004). This study did not specifically identify participant's household makeups, however some participants only made references to one parent, which I can infer indicates a single-parent home. Despite the participant's family makeup, all the participants reported that the value of getting an education was expressed in their home. All of the participants reported that their parents were actively involved with their school, either through volunteering at school or through home-based activities. It was evident through the focus group discussions that parent involvement assisted in driving them toward success. The students that participated in this study had beliefs that are supported by researchers, such as Marchant et al. (2001), who articulated that high academic achievement aspirations are motivated by parents' expectations. One participant in particular expressed his feelings toward his mother visiting and volunteering at the school. His mothers' presence on a regular basis encouraged the participant to not only have academic success but also encouraged behavior that was pleasing to her. This supports Wilson-Jones' (2003) research that African American students had better grades and test scores when parents came to school to check on them, than students whose parents did not visit the school.

Instructional Strategies

According to students, how they are taught contributes to their academic success. All of the participants expressed that they were more successful in classes that were engaging and meaningful. Numerous research studies confirm that African American students from low-income areas are the most successful when they are engaged in instruction that is rigorous and meaningful (Pitre, 2019; Lee and Bierman, 2015).

Students have to find a purpose and value in what they are learning. One participant discussed how he felt that school was a waste of time and he did not see a use for it because it was not relevant to him. He was academically successful despite his disinterest; however, he could have had a more pleasant experience if the instruction was presented to him in a method that was applicable to him.

During the focus groups, the students talked about several different instructional methods that were beneficial to them and assisted in their academic success. The incorporation of music was discussed frequently. For example, one of the participants explained how her teacher created songs to assist in remembering important concepts. The incorporation of games into instructional lessons was another instructional strategy that the students described as a contributor to their academic success.

As the participants discussed instructional strategies that contributed to their success in the class a common theme emerged: Interactive learning. None of the instructional strategies mentioned by the students involved lectures or a “sit and get” style teaching method. Class discussions, hands-on activities, games and the incorporation of music and movement were viewed most favorably by the students and thus, most preferred. Students also contributed academic success to classes in which the teacher presented content that was relatable to them. This finding is supported by Tatum (2017) who explained that teachers can engage African American students in text that links classroom content to their experiences and interests.

During one of the focus group interviews a participant spoke of a class discussion on a novel that the class was reading titled, “Tears of a Tiger.” Her discussion to the book

exhibited how the text related and engaged her. I am sure that the participant mastered the academic standards that the teacher linked to that text due to how the participant vividly described the novel and the class discussion.

Teacher-Student Relationships

Relationships were thoroughly discussed during the focus group interviews. Participants emphasized the positive and negative impact of the relationships they formed with their teachers. The participants explained that positive teacher relationships were built when the teachers showed interest in them and set high expectations for their learning. When teachers challenged the students and provided rigorous assignments, the participants felt the teachers believed in their academic abilities. Participants also expressed knowing when teachers were authentic and truly cared about their academic success. Jill explained her perspective of this authentic relationship with her teacher. She spoke about her favorite teacher treating her like a person. She described her interactions with the teacher as being respectful and caring. The teacher made an effort to always acknowledge her and others in the class and had conversations to get to know them outside of class, such as sports and hobbies. Jill stated in addition to acknowledging the students, the teacher worked hard to make a connection with her students. This approach to establishing relationships with students created motivation for them to have a desire to be academically successful. Jill's response during the focus group supports Woodward's (2018) findings that an effective student-teacher relationship is built through the teacher having a positive perception toward their students. As stated by Cholewa et al. (2012),

the positive student-teacher relationships increase the participants' academic achievement.

Jay, conversely, spoke of a negative teacher relationship he experienced that motivated him to be successful. Fortunately, Jay was intrinsically motivated to maintain good grades which allowed him to still perform well despite a non-supportive teacher. The teacher's negative demeanor toward Jay only motivated him more to exceed her low expectations. He desired to prove he was capable of high academic achievement. Jay felt mistreated and expressed that the teacher seemed suspicious of his high academic achievement, however he stayed focused and resilient. Research by McDougal, Cox, & Dorley (2018) support Jay's actions that highly motivated African American students deal with teachers' low expectations of them through positive thinking and determination.

Peer Influences

In this study the students explained the importance of having peers that supported their academic achievements. The students specifically mentioned the support from other African American high-achieving students as being meaningful to them. Although some participants discussed that negative peer interactions can affect African American student achievement, the participants of this study expressed their gratitude of having supportive peers. Same-race peers were discussed during all of the focus group interviews. All the participants had some sort of same-race peer that provided support and encouragement to them. Some of the participants discussed that same-race peers were important because they understood their struggles and could relate to them more than a non-African American peer. The participants also brought up the importance of their peers having

similar values in education; that like-minded peers assisted in keeping the participants motivated and focused on maintaining good grades.

What do African American students from an economically vulnerable rural community perceive as challenges to their academic success?

The participants discussed many challenges that they face as an African American rural student from an economically vulnerable background. Many of the challenges the students encountered align with Tabron & Chambers' (2019) findings of racial opportunity costs. The participants explained psychosocial costs of feeling lonely and isolated at times due to being the only student of color in their advanced classes. They expressed representation costs they faced by carrying the burden of the entire African American race on their shoulders. Several participants believed that their success was a testament to the academic capabilities of African American people. A few participants felt that if they failed academically and did not conform to White normed behaviors, they would prove racist ideologies of African American students to be true. This desire to combat racism motivated the participants to work even harder to be academically successfully.

Racial identity was another challenge for the participants of the study. The participants all strongly embraced their race and expressed pride in being African American, but some felt disjointed with how they were supposed to act. Several of the participants expressed the notion of "acting White" and "acting Black." References were made by the participants that acting Black meant that you were loud, not focused academically and behavior problems. Acting White was described as quiet, focused and

attentive in class. The racial differences described by the participants cause internal conflict. That is, some of the participants feel acting White contributes to their academic success while also causing them to feel disconnected from same-race peers that are not academically successful. This feeling of disconnection from one's racial or cultural community is considered a community cost that academically African American students face (Tabron & Chambers (2009).

What advice do African American students from an economically vulnerable rural community have for their peers, educators, and family?

The participants were excited to share advice for their fellow African American peers as well as educators and families.

Peer Advice

The advice that was given for peers was all centered on how to be academically successful. The participants advised students to stay focused on their academics and to not be afraid to ask questions in class. Some of the participants expressed that being the only African American in an advanced class can be intimidating, but encouraged their peers not to be afraid, but rather to be vulnerable and ask questions. One participant stated that asking questions is what assisted in his success in his Math 1 class because it ensured that he knew how to work through all the math problems. The participants urged other African American students from economically vulnerable rural communities to find peers that were also focused on performing well in school. The participants explained that having peers that were also successful in school allows one to have study buddies and a strong support system. The participants also encouraged their peers to get involved in

extracurricular activities. One participant explained how being involved in sports allowed her to meet new people and to keep her occupied afterschool so that she did not get involved in negative activities outside of school that would affect her grades.

Educators Advice

Students advised educators that building strong relationships was the most vital thing they could do for students. The participants felt that educators needed to know that students want teachers to like them and show it. They encouraged educators to build positive relationships with their students. The participants also wanted to advise teachers that worksheets are not the best option for getting students to be engaged in instruction. Activities that incorporate movement or are hands on were tasks that the participants advised educators to use.

The participants also wanted to advise educators to be mindful of their attitudes towards students. One participant discussed how he felt his teacher was racist because of her facial expressions and body language when addressing him. His advice to teachers was that if you do not want to be a teacher, don't be one. He said that students pick up on if a teacher cares or if they are just there for a paycheck.

Family Advice

The most heart-felt advice the participants gave for families was to just "be there." Some participants felt that parent involvement dropped off when they got to middle school. For example, class parties stopped and opportunities for their parents to come in and volunteer at school had lessened dramatically. These participants advised parents to come to school and eat lunch with their students often and let them know that

you care. All of the participants expressed that their parents ask about their school day and are involved with their schoolwork, which led to them advising parents to stay involved with their children's academics.

Implications

Although all of the students in this study were academically successful, the majority of the participants perceived their schooling experiences as stressful and challenging. The challenges and obstacles that African American students from rural economically vulnerable communities face in schools suggest the urgent need for school leaders to intervene. Stress should not be the first word that comes to mind when a student reflects on their school experience. Several implications emerged from the study on how school leaders and other educational stakeholders can improve the academic experiences of African American rural students from an economically vulnerable area. To begin, educators must work diligently to form meaningful relationships with their students. The participants in the study clearly indicated that they knew when their teachers cared about them and when they did not. African American students from rural economically vulnerable communities need educators that support and challenge them. When teachers challenge students and provide them with relevant and rigorous assignments they excel. Several participants spoke of how they enjoyed being challenged, it made them feel smart and confident because their teachers believed they could raise to a higher level. As cited previously, African American students achieve higher levels of academic success when they are provided with meaningful and rigorous assignments.

Several participants perceived that having an African American teacher contributed to their academic success. This implies that efforts should be made by principals and district leaders to increase the amount of African American teachers in their districts. One step in accomplishing this could be by expanding recruitment efforts to Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

Secondly, the participants in this study perceived their parents' involvement in their education as a huge influencer of their academic success. School leaders should capitalize on this perception and find ways to continuously communicate and involve their African American parents. Due to work schedules parents cannot always physically come to the school, however this does not mean that they are not involved at home, which was illustrated in this study. African American parents from economically vulnerable communities often focus on dimensions of parental involvement that do not depend heavily on school contact. Bartz et al. (2017) describe subtle types of parental involvement; these activities were described by the study participants and included parents' believing in their child's ability, communicating with their child about school, and holding high expectations for their child's academic achievement. To further expand the range of African American students that are academically successful, I imply that schools should create parental involvement plans that aim to engage parents in their child's education, as well as provide parents with specific strategies in how they can support their child's education at home.

Thirdly, much work needs to be done to lessen the racial opportunity costs the participants in this study and other academically successful African American students

face in schools. To accomplish this, school leaders, such as superintendents, principals and central office leaders, must first recognize and acknowledge the racial educational disparities that exist in their schools. Efforts should be made to extend advanced class opportunities to more African American rural students. When assigning classes to students, administrators must make a conscious effort to have at least two African American students in the same class to assist with the peer support the study participants discussed during the pilot study. This will assist in eliminating Talent development opportunities should also be provided to African American rural students to nurture academic success. District mandated professional development focused on cultural responsiveness, implicit biases, and even the racial opportunity cost theory would bring awareness to obstacles that students in their classes or school district face.

Missed Opportunities on Racism

As discussed in Chapter 1, there is an urgency for students to be taught how to navigate institutional racism. I was surprised by some of the students' responses, such as when some described their African American peers as lacking drive and motivation. Other discussions that concerned me involved how the students illustrated what it means to "act Black" and "act White." These discussions about race with the participants further shows the need for teachers and other school leaders to have discussions with youth on the subtleties of race and racism; for example, how racist tropes in greater society, as well as schools, can be internalized by minoritized people. Thus, there were missed opportunities in this study to discuss racism. I felt challenged to probe the students deeper on their responses that alluded to internal racism because I wanted to maintain the focus

of this study on academic success. However, in retrospect, I felt this was an area that would have been powerful to follow up on. Being that the participants are in middle school, I was surprised that they held thoughts that follow historical racist theories of African Americans. Further probing them could have revealed the source of their feelings toward African American inferiority.

When the participants were asked about challenges that African American students face, focus group 4 discussed social figures, such as rappers. Jay in particular discussed how a lot of Black males look up to rappers. He stated that rappers don't always display a good image for young Black boys. This comment made me ponder if figures, such as the rappers that Jay described influenced the frame of reference African American youth use to describe what it means to act Black. A powerful follow up study could focus on further discovering what influences African American youths' ideas on racial identity and Black inferiority.

Racial Opportunity Cost Model Revisited

The theoretical framework for this study was centered on Dr. Venzant Chamber's racial opportunity cost model. Dr. Venzant Chambers uses this racial opportunity cost framework to work with other researchers on studies of high-achieving students of color. This framework has also been used by researchers to highlight students' experiences and educators' roles in addressing racial opportunity costs to foster student engagement and academic achievement. I used this model to highlight the costs (challenges) that academically successful students face on the road to obtaining academic success.

I found value in addressing the racial opportunity costs that middle school high-achieving African American student's experience. Chambers' model, as shown in Figure 1, contains four components that work together in a cycle, as well as mediating variables. For this study I focused on the racial opportunity costs component of Chambers' model, as well as school factors. In this study, psychosocial and representation costs clearly emerged; however, there was not enough data to discern an overarching theme involving community costs. This does not mean that Chambers' model is inadequate, but rather, that COVID-19 limited how interviews took place as well as how often we could meet. These limitations also influenced how many questions I could ask; and further, how far I could probe into unaddressed territory.

Representation Costs

The most salient cost for students in this study were representation costs. Most participants saw themselves as representatives of their race, but also as individuals. Even though the participants were young, they discussed racist views that are commonly held by adults about African American people. The participants felt as though their actions and achievement assisted in representing the African American race in a positive light. However, the students also viewed themselves as individuals. Quite a few participants felt that they were individuals due to considering themselves outliers to the majority of the African American students in their school. This individuality may have been due to the participant's descriptions of their African American peers in stereotypical ways, such as being loud and attention seeking, and the desire to separate themselves from this image. The prevailing assumption that African Americans as a whole are underachievers

is a terrible problem that must be recognized and addressed by school leaders. Something is going terribly wrong in schools when African Americans view their peers in a discriminatory light such as this. Schools must take action to begin correcting this problem.

School Factors

Engagement factors, structural factors and relational factors were all components of Chambers' school factor section of the racial opportunity cost model that emerged in this study. Some positive factors the participants spoke on included how varying instructional strategies engaged them in learning. Moreover, positive student-teacher relationships influenced their success and drive to perform well. Relational factors were very important to the participants. Also, varying types of extrinsic motivators offered by the school, such as reward celebrations encouraged students to become more engaged with instruction to achieve academic success.

On a less positive note, structural factors, such as school segregation, exacerbated racial opportunity costs. I refer to school segregation as the separation of classes in schools by race, such as the advanced class compositions being mainly representative of one race. Numerous participants spoke about being the only African American in their advanced classes or only having one other African American peer in their classes. This structural factor of segregation, contributed to the psychosocial and representation costs the participants faced in this study. This structural factor may also contribute to why some of the participants had negative views of their African American peers.

Something must be done about structural factors, such as class segregation. It is a major problem that these high achieving African American students describe their same race peers in derogatory ways. Schools can work to correct this. I suggest that schools promote diversity throughout the building to work toward changing the view students have on African American success. Schools should start early, such as in elementary school to discuss racial differences in a positive way and promote diversity. This can begin to be achieved as simply as creating diverse bulletin boards. Teachers should diversify their classrooms and instructional materials to include different races/ethnicities. For example, Figure 3 provides an example of an elementary school that is starting early by reading diverse books and having positive conversations promoting diversity in skin color.

Lastly, I suggest that teachers raise the bar by increasing the academic rigor for African American students. As well as promote intelligent African American figures that made a major contribution to society. Figure 4 shows an example of a door display that was used to promote Katherine Johnson, a brilliant African American mathematician whose calculations assisted in the successful launch of a rocket into space.

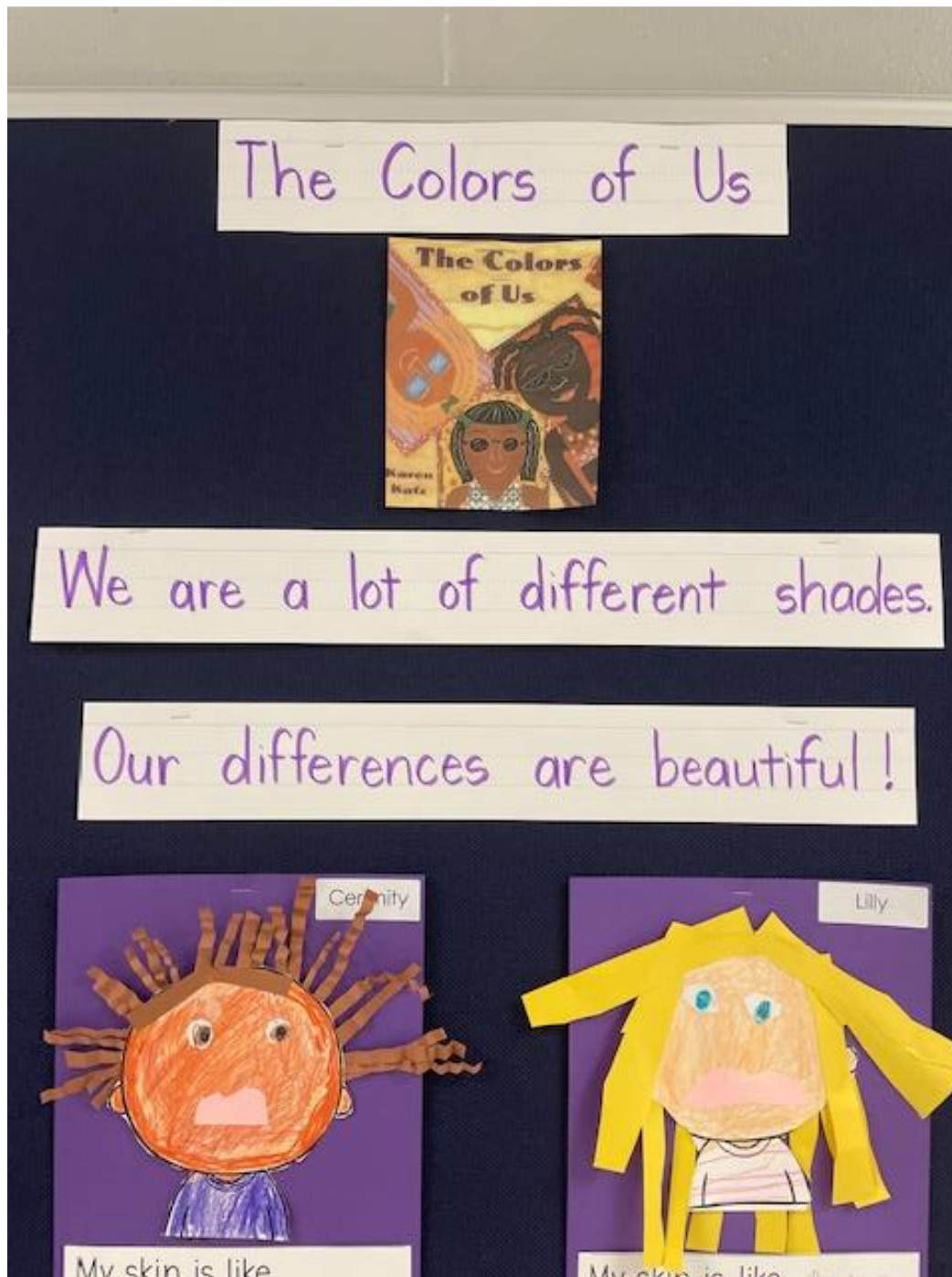
Figure 3***Bulletin Board Promoting Diversity***

Figure 4

Katherine Johnson Door Display

As discussed in the literature review, research shows that African American students are more successful when instruction is rigorous and meaningful. By displaying and discussing successful Black figures with students. This helps promote diversity and show students that African Americans can be successful in rigorous discipline, such as math and science, that intelligence and success does not signal one's skin tone.

Recommendations for Further Research

While recruiting participants for this study, it was difficult to get African American males to consent to participate in the study. Although this was disappointing the information that was gained from the few male participants was valuable in discovering how they perceived their educational experience as well as their challenges. Based on the rich dialogue I had with the small number of rural African American males, I recommend further research focuses on rural male African American academically successful students, but specifically asset-based research that highlights what is working in aiding their academic success. Numerous researchers in the past have focused on urban African American males, but a study that is focused solely on rural African American males would be beneficial for small rural districts that are seeking to increase the achievement of their African American boys and young men.

This study did not address the influence or impact of community factors on rural African American students. Another recommendation for further research is to seek to discuss the impact that community enticements, such as community centers, churches, barber and beauty shops have on rural African American achievement.

Study participants identified parents as a tremendous influence on their academic achievement. Therefore, I recommend further research on parents' perceptions on how they support their child's academic performance. Due to the strong impact rural African American parents have on student achievement, it may be beneficial to know how parents perceive ways they support their students academically. The findings of a study of this nature could possibly provide rural districts with additional strategies on how to educate and support parental involvement.

Challenges to rural African American student achievement in this study aligned with Terah Venzant Chambers' racial opportunity cost theory. I would like to further expand this research study to solely focus on the racial opportunity costs of rural African American students and the impact of them on African American students that are not academically successful. My hope would be that the results of that study could further aid rural districts in improving the educational experiences of struggling African American students.

Final Thoughts

Of all the civil rights for which the world has struggled and fought for 5000 years, the right to learn is undoubtedly the most fundamental. ~ W.E.B DuBois

When I embarked on this journey 4 years ago, I had no idea what was going to happen in a few years in terms of African American issues. Four years ago, media attention was not being given to police mistreatment of Black people. We did not have world-wide protests due to media publicized police shootings of unarmed Black men and women, and allowable paintings on streets bearing the words "Black Lives Matter" was

unheard of, yet now we are here. In the midst of all of those things, we are now battling a pandemic. As the United States faces these many challenges, which are all important and worth attention, like W.E.B. DuBois, I feel that the right for African Americans to learn is still among the most fundamental fights we battle today. African American students have been granted access to education, but African Americans as a whole are still not achieving at the same levels as White students. This lack of achievement can become discouraging to the African American community, which is the reason why I selected to highlight African American students that are academically successful.

The findings of this study confirmed my believe that all African Americans have the ability to be academically successful. All the participants of this study valued education and have a strong support system that encourages their academic success. The students that participated in the study were focused on their academic goals to maintain good grades throughout middle and high school. They associated high achievement as a steppingstone to being accepted into college and/or to allow them to obtain a better lifestyle.

All of the participants were excited to share their schooling experiences with me. Their parents were also more than willing to allow them to participate in the study. The students engaged in rich discussions and complemented each other's input during the focus group interviews. Aside from the research study focus, the students discussed the impact school closure and virtual learning mandates, due to the current Covid-19 pandemic, has had on their academic achievement. Luckily, all of the participants have maintained high academic achievement.

If I were to repeat this study, I would have done a few things differently. First, I would have explored institutional racism in depth to explore what barriers existed in Bloomsdale that were preventing more African American from being academically successful. Secondly, I would have expanded my participants to include parents. Due to the majority of the students discussing their parents' involvement as being more home-based than school based, I am left wondering if the participants parents had negative experiences in school.

When I began this study, I selected Bloomsdale for its location as a school district situated in a rural, economically challenged area with strong representation of Black and Brown students. This was also convenient for me since I am an administrator at the elementary school nearby. I also love this community. It is the only middle school in the town of Bloomsdale and despite the low socioeconomic status of the majority of the towns people, they are welcoming and very close knit. Assumptions I had of students from a rural economically vulnerable community were disrupted. Due to the economic vulnerability of the town, I assumed that discussions of poverty or lack of school resources would come up during discussions with the focus group participants, however it did not come up at all, except when a few participants discussed wanting to achieve more than their parents were able to achieve.

In conclusion, the findings of this study revealed that parental involvement, effective instructional/teaching strategies, student-teacher relationships and supportive peers promote high academic achievement for rural African American students from economically vulnerable communities. This study also uncovered that although students

may be academically successful, they are still faced with challenges that were described in this study as racial opportunity costs. My hope is that this study will be used to inform teachers and school and district leaders to further support rural African American middle school students as they progress throughout their K-12 education. As expressed by Chambers & Tabron (2019) high-achieving African American students should not be left to fend for themselves. As a school community, we must work together to break down institutional barriers to increase the number of African Americans in accelerated and gifted programs.

REFERENCES

- A Century of Racial Segregation, 1849–1950*. [collection]. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/brown/brown-segregation.html>
- Allen, Q. (2015). "I'm trying to get my A": Black male achievers talk about race, school and achievement. *The Urban Review*, 47(1), 209-231. doi:10.1007/s11256-014-0315-4
- Anderson, L. A. (2019). Rethinking resilience theory in African American families: fostering positive adaptations and transformative social justice. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 11(3), 385–397.
- Arancibia, V., Boyanova, D., & Gonzalez, P. (2016). Cognitive characteristics of gifted and not gifted fifth-grade Chilean students from economically vulnerable contexts. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, 4(4), 744-754.
- Archambault, I., Janosz, M., Morizot, J., & Pagani, L. (2009). Adolescent behavioral, affective, and cognitive engagement in school: Relationship to dropout. *Journal of School Health*, 79(9), 408-415.

- Bailey, D. F., & Paisley, P. O. (2004). Developing and nurturing excellence in African American male adolescents. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 82(1), 10-17.
- Barley, Zoe. (2007). Rural school success: What can we learn? *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 22(1), 1-16.
- Barr, R. & Parrett, W. (2007). *The kids left behind: Catching up the underachieving children of poverty*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Bartz, D. E., & Rice, P. (2017). Enhancing education for African American children. *National Forum of Teacher Education Journal*, 27(3), 1-11.
- Berry, R. (2005). Voices of success: Descriptive portraits of two successful African American male middle school mathematics students. *Journal of African American Studies*, 8(4), 46-62.
- Blad, E. (2019 September 10). How ESSA could complicate rural turnarounds. *Education Week*, 39(4). Retrieved on January 7, 2020 from <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2019/09/11/how-essa-could-complicate-rural-turnarounds.html>
- Bottiani, J. H., Bradshaw, C. P., & Mendelson, T. (2016). Inequality in Black and White high school students' perceptions of school support: An examination of race in context. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 45(6), 1176–1191.

- Bron, J., & Veugelers, W. (2014). Why we need to involve our students in curriculum design: Five arguments for student voice. *Curriculum and Teaching Dialogue*, 16(1), 125-139.
- Brown, D. L. (2008). African American resiliency: Examining racial socialization and social support as protective factors. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 34(1), 32–48.
- Brown, G. (2016). Leadership's Influence: A Case Study of an Elementary Principal' Indirect Impact on Student Achievement. *Education*, 737(1), 101-115.
- Bukowski, W. M., & DeLay, D. (2020). Studying the same-gender preference as a defining feature of cultural contexts. *Frontiers in psychology*, 11, 1863.
- Burrell, J., Winston, C., & Freeman, K. (2012). Race-acting: The varied and complex affirmative meaning of "acting Black" for African American adolescents. *Culture & Psychology*, 19(1), 95-116. doi:10.1177/1354067X12464981
- Butler, J.K., Kane, R.G., & Morshead, C.E. (2017). “It’s my safe space”: Student voice, teacher education, and the relational space of an urban high school. *Urban Education*, 52(7), 889-916.
- Carter, R. T., & Goodwin, A. L. (1994). Chapter 7: Racial identity and education. *Review of Research in Education*, 20(1), 291–336.

Chambers, T. T. V. (2011). Mergers and weavers: Using racial opportunity cost to frame high-achieving African American students' school culture navigation styles.

Journal of Educational Administration and Foundations, 22(2), 3-26.

Chambers, T. T. V. & Huggins, K. S. (2014). The influence of school factors on racial opportunity cost for high-achieving students of color. *Journal of School Leadership*, 24(1), 189-225.

Chambers, T. T. V., Locke, L. A., & Tagarao, A. M. (2015) "That fuego, that fire in their stomach": Academically successful Latinas/os and racial opportunity cost. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 28(7), 800-818.

Cholewa, B., Amatea, E., West-Olatunji, C. A., & Wright, A. (2012). Examining the relational processes of a highly successful teacher of African American children. *Urban Education*, 47(1), 250–279.

Cook-Sather, A. (2010). Students as learners and teachers: Taking responsibility, transforming education, and redefining accountability. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 40(4), 555–575.

Cooper, S. M., McLoyd, V. C., Wood, D., & Hardaway, C. R. (2008). Racial discrimination and the mental health of African American adolescents. *Handbook*

of race, racism, and the developing child, 278–312.

Comparison between asset and deficit based approaches. (2020). Retrieved 25 March 2020, from <https://www.memphis.edu/ess/module4/page3.php>

Conner, J. O., Ebby-Rosin, R., & Brown, A. S. (2015). Introduction to student voice in American education policy (Reprinted from NSSE Yearbook, vol. 114, pgs. 1-18, 2015). *Teachers College Record*, 117(13), 1-18.

Crenshaw, K., Ocen, P., & Nanda, J. (2015). Black girls matter: Pushed out, overpoliced, and underprotected. African American Policy Forum and Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies. Retrieved from https://www.atlanticphilanthropies.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/BlackGirlsMatter_Report.pdf

Creswell, J. W. (2008). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc.

Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. Boston, MA: Pearson.

Creswell, J. W. (Ed.). (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles: Sage.

Darling-Hammond, L., & Ascher, C. (1991). Creating accountability in big city schools.

Eric Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Institute on Urban and Minority
Education.

Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2012). *Critical race theory: An introduction, 2nd edition*.

New York, NY: New York University Press.

Delpit, L. (2012). "Multiplication is for white people": Raising expectations for other
people's children. ProQuest Ebook Central <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com>

Diaz Andrade, A. (2009). Interpretive research aiming at theory building: Adopting and
adapting the case study design. *The Qualitative Report*, 14(1), 42-60.

Donovan, M. S., & Cross, C. T. (Eds.). (2002). *Minority students in special and gifted
education*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.

<https://doi.org/10.17226/10128>

Dumas, M., & Nelson, J. (2016). (Re)Imagining black boyhood: Toward a critical
framework for educational research. *Harvard Educational Review*, 86(1), 27-156.

Elion, A. A., Wang, K. T., Slaney, R. B., & French, B. H. (2012). Perfectionism in
African American students: relationship to racial identity, GPA, self-esteem, and
depression. *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 18(2), 118–27.

- Fashola, O. (2005). *Educating African American males: Voices from the field*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Fisher, M. H., & Crawford, B. (2020). "From school of crisis to distinguished": Using Maslow's hierarchy in a rural underperforming school. *The Rural Educator*, 41(1), 8-19.
- Ford, D. Y. (1996). *Reversing underachievement among gifted Black students: Promising practices and programs*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Ford, D., Grantham, T., & Whiting, G. (2008). Another look at the achievement gap: Learning from the experiences of gifted black students. *Urban Education*, 43(2), 216–239.
- Ford, D. Y., Howard, T. C., Harris, J. J., III, & Tyson, C. A. (2000). Creating culturally responsive classrooms for gifted African American students. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 23(4), 397–427.
- Fordham, S., & Ogbu, J. U. (1986). Black students' school success: Coping with the “burden of acting white”. *The Urban Review*, 18(3), 176-206.
- Fries-Britt, S. (1997). Identifying and supporting gifted African American men. *New Directions for Student Services*, 1997(80), 65-78.

- Germán, L. (2019). To dismantle racism, we must discuss it. *English Journal*, 108(4), 15-16.
- Grissom, J. A., & Redding, C. (2016). Discretion and disproportionality: explaining the underrepresentation of high-achieving students of color in gifted programs. *Aera Open*, 2(1), 1-25.
- Graham, A., Haner, M., Sloan, M., Cullen, F., Kulig, T., & Jonson, C. (2020). Race and worrying about police brutality: The hidden injuries of minority status in America. *Victims & Offenders*, 15(4), 1-25.
- Harper, S. R. (2009). Niggers no more: A critical race counter narrative on Black male student achievement at predominantly White colleges and universities. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 22, 697-712.
- Hennink, M. (2014). *Focus group discussions*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hines, E. M., & Holcomb-McCoy, C. (2013). Parental characteristics, ecological factors, and the academic achievement of African American males. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 91(1), 68-77.
- Hoffman, J., Anderson-Butcher, D., Fuller, M., & Bates, S. (2017). The school experiences of rural youths: A study in Appalachian Ohio, *Children & Schools*, 39(3), 147-155.

- Howard, T. (2008). Who really cares? The disenfranchisement of African American males in preK-12 schools: A critical race theory perspective. *Teachers College Record, 110*(5).
- Howard, T. (2013). How does it feel to be a problem? Black male students, schools, and learning in enhancing the knowledge base to disrupt deficit frameworks. *Review of Research in Education, 37*(1), 54-86. doi:10.3102/0091732X12462985
- Howard, T., Douglas, T.-r., & Warren, C. (2016). "What works": Recommendations on improving academic experiences and outcomes for black males. *Teachers College Record, 118*(6), 1-10.
- Hrabowski, Freeman A., Kenneth I. Maton. (1998). "Preparing the way: A qualitative study of high achieving African American males and the role of the family." *American Journal of Community Psychology, 26*, 639-669.
- Hurd, N. M., Sánchez, B., Zimmerman, M. A., & Caldwell, C. H. (2012). Natural mentors, racial identity, and educational attainment among African American adolescents: exploring pathways to success. *Child Development, 83*(4), 1196–1212. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2012.01769.x>
- Irvin, M. J., Byun, S. Y., Meece, J. L., Reed, K. S., & Farmer, T. W. (2016). School characteristics and experiences of African American, Hispanic/Latino, and Native

American youth in rural communities: Relation to educational aspirations.

Peabody Journal of Education, 91(2), 176-202.

Jenkins, E. W. (2006). The student voice and school science education. *Studies in Science Education*, 42, 49-88.

Johnson, R. B. & Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2004). Mixed methods research: A research paradigm whose time has come. *Educational Researcher*, 33(7), 14-26.

Johnson, S. M. (1990). *Teachers at work: Achieving success in our schools*. New York: Basic Books.

Kelley, R. D. (2018). Black study, black struggle. *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies*, 40(2).

Khalifa, M. (2012). Are-new-ed paradigm in successful urban school leadership principal as community leader. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 48(3), 424-467.

Khalifa, M.A., Gooden, M.A., & Davis, J.A. (2016). Culturally responsive school leadership: A synthesis of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 86 (4), 1272-1311.

Kim, E., & Hargrove, D. T. (2013). Deficient or resilient: A critical review of Black male academic success and persistence in higher education. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 82(3), 300-311.

Kuenzi, J. (2008). CRS report for congress: Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education. In *Library of Congress, Washington, DC*. Retrieved from <http://steamwise.io/docs/congressional-research-service-R42642.pdf>

Leake, D. O., & Leake, B. L. (1992). Islands of hope: Milwaukee's African American immersion schools. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 61(1), 24-29.

Lee, P., & Bierman, K. L. (2015). Classroom and teacher support in kindergarten: Associations with the behavioral and academic adjustment of low-income students. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 61(3), 383-411.

Lipsitz, J., & West, T. (2006). "What makes a good school? Identifying excellent middle Schools." *Phi Delta Kappan*, 88(1), 57-66.

Locke, L. A., Tabron, L. A., & Chambers, T. T. (2017). "If you show who you are, then they are going to try to fix you": The capitals and costs of schooling for high-achieving Latina students. *Educational Studies*, 53(1), 13-36, DOI:10.1080/00131946.2016.1261027

Loveless, T., Parkas, S., & Duffett, A. (2008). High-achieving students in the era of NCLB. Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institute. Retrieved from

<http://www.edexcellence.net/foundation/publication/index.cfm>.

Lynn, M., Bacon, J., Totten, T., Bridges, III, T., & Jennings, M. (2010). Examining teachers' beliefs about African American male students in a low-performing high school in an African American school district. *The Teachers College Record*, 112(1), 289-330.

Macnaghten, P., & Myers, G. (2004). Focus groups. In C. Seale, G. Gobo, J.F. Gubrium, & D. Silverman (Eds.), *Qualitative research practice* (p. 65-79). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Madhlangobe, L., & Gordon, S. P. (2012). Culturally responsive leadership in a diverse school: A case study of a high school leader. *NASSP Bulletin*, 96, 177-202.

Malterud, K. (2001). Qualitative research: Standards, challenges and guidelines. *The Lancet*, 358, 483-488.

Mansfield, K.C. (2014). How listening to student voices can inform and strengthen social justice research and practice. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 50(3), 392–430. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X13505288>

Mansfield, K.C. (2015a). Giftedness as property: Troubling whiteness, wealth, and gifted education in the US. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, 17(1),

121-142.

Mansfield, K. C. (2015b). The importance of safe space and student voice in schools that serve minoritized learners. *Journal of Educational Leadership, Policy and Practice*, 30(1), 25-38.

Mansfield, K.C. & Newcomb, W.S. (2015). Student identities matter: A review of the research with implications for ethical leadership. *Scholar-Practitioner Quarterly*, 8 (2), 15-32.

Mansfield, K.C. (2016). The color of giftedness: A policy genealogy implicating educators past, present, and future. *Educational Studies*, 52(4), 1-24. DOI: 10.1080/00131946.2016.1190364

Mansfield, K.C., Fowler, E., & Rainbolt, S. (2018). The potential of restorative practices to ameliorate discipline gaps: The story of one high school's leadership team. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 54(2), 303-323.

<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0013161X17751178>

Mansfield, K.C., Rainbolt, S., & Fowler, E. (2018). Implementing restorative justice as a step toward racial equity in school discipline. *Teachers College Record*, 120(14), 1-24. <http://www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentId=22385>

- Marchant, G., Paulson, S., and Rothlisberg, B. (2001). Relations of middle school students' perceptions of family and school contexts with academic achievement. *Psychology in the Schools*, 38(6): 505–519.
- Marguerite, G. L., Dean, T. S., & Katherine, H. V. (2006). *Methods in Educational Research: From theory to practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- McCoy, D. C., Wolf, S., & Godfrey, E. B. (2014). Student motivation for learning in Ghana: Relationships with caregivers' values toward education, attendance, and academic achievement. *School Psychology International*, 35(3), 294-308.
- McDougal III, S., Cox, W., Dorley, T., & Wodaje, H. (2018). Black student engagement: Resilience & success under duress. *Journal of Pan African Studies*, 12(7), 192–215.
- Merriam, S. & Tisdell, E. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Miller, D. B., & MacIntosh, R. (1999). Promoting resilience in urban African American adolescents: Racial socialization and identity as protective factors. *Social work research*, 23(3), 159-169.
- Milner IV, H. R. (2018). Relationship-centered teaching: Addressing racial tensions in classrooms. *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, 54(2), 60-66.

- Morris, J. E. (2002). African American students and gifted education: The politics of race and culture. *Roeper Review*, 24, 59–62.
- Morales, E. E., & Trotman, F. K. (2011). *A focus on hope: 50 resilient students speak*. Lanham, MD: Rowman.
- Mueller, B., Baker, A., & Robbins, L. (2015). James Blake's arrest brings swift apologies from New York Officials. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/11/nyregion/james-blake-new-york-police-officer.html>
- Murry, V. M., Butler-Barnes, S. T., Mayo-Gamble, T. L., & Inniss-Thompson, M. N. (2018). Excavating new constructs for family stress theories in the context of everyday life experiences of Black American families. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 10(2), 384–405.
- Nash, K. T., & Miller, E. T. (2015). Reifying and resisting racism from early childhood to young adulthood. *The Urban Review*, 47(1), 184–208.
- Nicolas, G., Helms, J., Jernigan, M., Sass, T., Skrzyypek, A., & DeSilva, A. (2008). A conceptual framework for understanding the strengths of Black youths. *Journal of Black Psychology*. 34(3), 261-280.

- Noddings, N. (1992). *Handbook of research on curriculum*. New York: Macmillan.
- Noguera, P. (2003). The trouble with black boys: The role and influence of environmental and cultural factors on the academic performance of African American males. *Urban Education*, 38(4), 431-459.
- Ogbu, J. (2004). Collective identity and the burden of “acting white” in Black history, community, and education. *The Urban Review*, 36(1), 1-35.
- Patton, L. D., Crenshaw, K. Haynes, C., Watson. T. N. (2016). Why we can’t wait: (Re)Examining the opportunities and challenges for Black women and girls in education. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 85(3), 194-198.
- Pitre, C. (2014). Improving African American student outcomes: understanding educational achievement and strategies to close opportunity gaps. *Western Journal of Black Studies*, 38(4), 209–217.
- Redeaux, M. (2011). A Framework for Maintaining White Privilege: A Critique of Ruby Payne. *Counterpoints*, 402(1), 177-198. Retrieved February 14, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42981082>
- Redding, C. (2019). A teacher like me: a review of the effect of student–teacher racial/ethnic matching on teacher perceptions of students and student academic

and behavioral outcomes. *Review of Educational Research*, 89(4), 499–535.

Reynolds, R. (2010). “They think you’re lazy,” and other messages Black parents send their Black sons: An exploration of critical race theory in the examination of educational outcomes for black males. *Journal of African American Males in Education*, 1(1), 144- 163.

Rist, R. (2000). Her classic reprint - student social class and teacher expectations: The self-fulfilling prophecy in ghetto education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 70(3), 257–302.

Ritchie, A. J. (2017). *Invisible no more: Police violence against Black women and women of color*. Beacon Press.

Ruble, D. N., Martin C. L., Berenbaum S. A. (2006). Gender development. *Handbook of Child Psychology*, 6(3), 858–932.

Rutter, M. (2007). Resilience, competence, and coping. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 31(3), 205.

Schwartz, J. (2015). Black girls matter: pushed out, overpoliced, and underprotected. *Children's Rights Litigation*, 17(3).

Shore, B.M., & Kanevsky, L.S. (1993). Thinking processes: Being and becoming gifted.

In K. A. Heller, F. J. Mönks & A. H. Passow (Eds.) *International handbook of research and development of giftedness and talent*. (pp. 133-147). Pergamon Press.

Showalter, D., Hartman, S.L., Johnson, J., & Klein, R. (2019). Why rural matters 2018-2019: The time is now. A report of the rural school and community trust. *Rural School and Community Trust*. Retrieved from <http://www.ruraledu.org>

Siedman, I. (2006). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researcher's in education and the social sciences*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Skiba, R. J., & Peterson, R. L. (2000). School discipline at a crossroads: From zero tolerance to early response. *Exceptional children*, 66(3), 335-346.

Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research*. SAGE.

Smokowski, P. R., Rose, R. A., Evans, C. B. R., Cotter, K. L., Bower, M., & Bacallao, M. (2014). Familial influences on internalizing symptomatology in Latino adolescents: An ecological analysis of parent mental health and acculturation dynamics. *Development and Psychopathology*, 26(4, Pt 2), 1191–1207.

- Somers, C. L., Owens, D., & Piliawsky, M. (2008). Individual and social factors related to urban African American adolescents' school performance. *The High School Journal*, 91(1), 1-11.
- Stewart, E. B. (2008). School structural characteristics, student effort, peer associations, and parental involvement: The influence of school- and individual-level factors on academic achievement. *Education and Urban Society*, 40(2), 179–204.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124507304167>
- Stinson, D. (2010). When the "burden of acting white" is not a burden: School success and African American male students. *The Urban Review*, 43(1), 43-65.
 doi:10.1007/s11256-009-0145-y
- St. Mary, J., Calhoun, M., Tejada, J., & Jenson, J. M. (2018). Perceptions of academic achievement and educational opportunities among black and African American youth. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 35(5), 499–509.
- Sturgeon, J. (2005). Little boy lost: The truth about achievement numbers for black males is staring administrators in the face. What can you do? *District Administration*, 41(11), 62.
- Schwartz, S. A. (2020). *Police brutality and racism in America*. New York, NY: Explore.

Tabron, L. A. & Chambers, T. T. V. (2019). What is being Black and high achieving going to cost me in your school? Students speak out about their educational experiences through a racial opportunity cost lens. *The High School Journal*, 102(2), 118-138.

Tatum, B. D. (1997). *“Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?” And other conversations about race*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Tatum, A. W. (2015). Engaging African American Males in Reading (Reprint): By providing meaningful reading material and encouraging honest debate, teachers can help African American adolescent males embrace the power of text. *Journal of Education*, 195(2), 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002205741519500202>

Trescott, J. (1990). Fate, hope and the Black child. *Emerge*, 1(7), 22-26.

Ungar, M. (2008). Resilience across cultures. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 38(2), 218-235.

Valencia, M. J. (2010). Sergeant, Gates both to blame, report says. *Boston Globe*.

http://archive.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2010/07/01/sergeant_gates_both_to_blame_report_says/

- Vega, D., Moore, J. L., & Miranda, A. H. (2015). Who really cares? urban youths' perceptions of parental and programmatic support. *School Community Journal*, 25(1), 53–72.
- Warikoo, N., Sinclair, S., Fei, J., & Jacoby-Senghor D. (2016). Examining racial bias in education: A new approach. *Educational Researcher*, 45(9), 508-514.
- Warren, C., Douglas, T., & Howard, T. (2016). In their own words: Erasing deficits and exploring what works to improve K-12 and postsecondary Black male school achievement. *Teachers College Record*, 118(6), 1-6.
- Watson, T. N. (2016). “Talking back”: The perceptions and experiences of Black girls who attend city high school. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 85(3), 239-249.
- Weinstein, C. S., Tomlinson-Clarke, S., & Curran, M. (2004). Toward a conception of culturally responsive classroom management. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 55(1), 25-38.
- West, M. R. (2016). Schools of choice. *Education Next*, 16(2), 46-54.
- Williams, J. M., & Portman, T. A. A. (2014). “No one ever asked me”: Urban African American students' perceptions of educational resilience. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 42(1), 13-30.

- Wilson-Jones, L. (2003). *Factors that promote and inhibit the academic achievement of rural elementary African American males in a Mississippi school: A qualitative study*. Biloxi: Mid-South Educational Research Association.
- Woodward, B. (2018). Centering the voice of black male urban high school students on effective student-teacher classroom relationships. *Journal of Urban Learning, Teaching, and Research*, 14(1), 63-72.
- Wright, A., Gottfried, M., & Le, V.. (2017). A kindergarten teacher like me: the role of student-teacher race in social-emotional development. *American Educational Research Journal*, 54(1), 78.

APPENDIX A

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS PROTOCOL

Introduction Text

My name is Mrs. Goodlett and I will be conducting this focus group interview today. I am a student just like you. I am working toward getting a doctoral degree. To finish my degree I have to do research. My research is focused on African American student success. All of you have been selected to be my research participants. As my research participant, your only requirement is to participate in this focus group interview. Unfortunately, in the United States there are more African American students not performing well in schools than African American students that are academically successful. Your input today will be very helpful to learn what factors have contributed to your success, so that I can possibly assist other African American students become academically successful.

Before we begin I would like you to choose a pseudonym. A pseudonym is a fake name that I will use in the place of your name. This will ensure that when individuals read my dissertation they will not be able to identify you. Please remember that your participation in this focus group interview is voluntary. If at any time you feel uncomfortable during the interview you may ask to leave the group.

Before we begin, I would like to go over a few ground rules. These are in place to ensure that all of you feel comfortable sharing your experiences.

Ground Rules:

1. *One Speaker at a Time* – Only one person should speak at a time in order to make sure that we can all hear what everyone is saying.

2. *Use Respectful Language* – In order to facilitate an open discussion, please avoid any statements or words that may be offensive to other members of the group.

3. *Open Discussion* – This is a time for everyone to feel free to express their opinions and viewpoints. There will be no right or wrong answers.

4. *Participation is Important* – It is important that everyone's voice is shared and heard in order to make this the most productive focus group possible. Please speak up if you have something to add to the conversation!

Questions

1. What words come to mind when you think of school?
2. How do you define success?
 - a. What does it look like to be a successful student?
3. What classifies a student as a “good student”?
 - a. Can you describe any qualities they have or types of behaviors that they exhibit in class?
4. What are some things that have helped you to be successful in school?
5. Are African American academically successful students viewed differently by their peers?
6. Do you feel academically successful African American students are faced with challenges?
7. Do you have any specific study strategies that you feel may have contributed to your academic success?
8. Although it would be great to be successful in school, not everyone is. What do you feel causes African American students to struggle in school?
9. Do you feel that peers influence if you will be successful or not? Why or why not?
10. Do you feel that parents influence your success?
 - a. Do they ask you about your school day? What types of things do they ask you about school?
 - b. Do they make you do homework every night?
11. What advice do you have for your peers on how to be academically successful in middle school? Family? Teachers?
12. What problems or challenges have you had to deal with because you are academically successful?
13. Have you ever been the only African American student in an advanced class? How did that make you feel?
14. Have you ever had someone treat you badly or differently because you're smart? Tell me about that experience.

Conclusion Text

Thank you for participating in today's focus group interview. As a reminder, I will be sharing the information learned during this session as a part of my dissertation, using your pseudonyms. If you think of any additional thoughts or comments that you would like to share, please contact me at adgoodle@uncg.edu

APPENDIX B

PARENTAL CONSENT FORM

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO

Project Title: Voices of Bloomsdale: A Student-Centered and Asset-Based Approach to Understanding the Experiences of Academically Successful African American Middle School Students

Principal Investigator and Faculty Advisor: Ashley Goodlett and Katherine Mansfield (Faculty Advisor)

Participant's Name:

What are some general things you should know about research studies?

Your child is being asked to take part in a research study. Your child's participation in the study is voluntary. You may choose for your child not to join, or you may withdraw your consent for him/her to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. There may not be any direct benefit to your child for being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies. If you choose for your child not to be in the study or you choose for your child to leave the study before it is done, it will not affect your relationship or your child's relationship with the researcher or the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Details about this study are discussed in this consent form. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about your child being in this research study.

You will be given a copy of this consent form. If you have any questions about this study at any time, you should ask the researchers named in this consent form. Their contact information is below.

Primary Investigator: Ashley Goodlett, email: adgoodle@uncg.edu

Faculty Advisor: Katherine Mansfield, email: kcmansfi@uncg.edu

What is the study about?

This is a research project. Your child's participation in this project is voluntary. This study involves research on the academic success of African American middle school students. The purpose of this study is to understand how successful rural African American students perceive their experiences in school. This study also aims to understand the variables that challenge students, as well as help them reach their academic goals. Your student would be involved in this work through their participation in a focus group interview.

Why are you asking my child?

The reason for selecting their child for this study is because they have been academically successful in school. This study specifically highlights successful African American middle school students and your child fits in this category. Confirmation that your child meets the criteria to participate in the study will be verified by a school staff member, such as the Assistant Principal or Guidance Counselor. The researcher will not request access to your child's academic record.

What will you ask my child to do if I agree to let him or her be in the study?

If you allow your child to participate in this study, they will participate in one 1-hour Zoom focus group interview with 4 of their same gender peers. They will be asked open ended questions about their educational experiences. This study possesses infrequent risk to students that participate. However, some students may experience embarrassment talking with peers and the researcher about their academic experiences.

Is there any audio/video recording of my child?

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, students will participate in the focus group interviews through Zoom. The Zoom meetings will be recorded in order for the primary researcher to review later. Because your child's voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the Zoom recording confidentiality for things said on the recording cannot be guaranteed although the researcher will try to limit access to the recording as described, all Zoom recordings will be stored in Box and the Zoom recordings will only be viewed while the primary researcher is alone to eliminate others from hearing the focus group interviews. The primary researcher will also wear headphones while reviewing the recorded Zoom focus group interviews to further ensure that your child's voice is not heard by others.

What are the dangers to my child?

The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants. Although it is rare to infrequent that a student may experience embarrassment discussing educational experiences in a group setting, it is possible. They may also experience shyness because they do not know the researcher. To minimize these risks, the researcher will separate focus groups by gender to minimize girls or boys from feeling uncomfortable talking in front of their opposite gender peers. The researcher will also introduce herself and talk a little bit about her background before starting the focus group interview to make the students feel more comfortable sharing.

If you have questions, want more information or have suggestions, please contact Ashley Goodlett, who may be reached at adgoodle@uncg.edu and Dr. Katherine Mansfield, who may be reached at kcmansfi@uncg.edu.

If you have any concerns about your rights, how you are being treated, concerns or complaints about this project or benefits or risks associated with being in this study please contact the Office of Research Integrity at UNCG toll-free at (855)-251-2351.

Are there any benefits to society as a result of my child taking part in this research?

This study may potentially benefit society because the knowledge gained from this study will assist educators and district leaders in best practices to further promote African American student success.

Are there any benefits to my child as a result of participation in this research study?

There are no direct benefits to participants in this study.

Will my child get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything for my kid to be in this study?

There are no costs to you or payments to you or your child as a result of participation in this study.

How will my child's information be kept confidential?

All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. All electronic data will be stored in Box. Students will not be identified by name when data is disseminated, and any non-electronic data will be stored in a locked file cabinet.

Will my child's de-identified data be used in future studies?

Your child's data will be destroyed after 5 years following study closure. Your child's de-identified data will not be used in future research projects.

What if my child wants to leave the study or I want him/her to leave the study?

You have the right to refuse to allow your child to participate or to withdraw him or her at any time, without penalty. If your child does withdraw, it will not affect you or your child in any way. If you or your child chooses to withdraw, you may request that any data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state. The investigators also have the right to stop your child's participation at any time. This could be because your child has had an unexpected reaction, has failed to follow instructions, or because the entire study has been stopped.

What about new information/changes in the study?

If significant new information relating to the study becomes available which may relate to your willingness to allow your child to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you.

Voluntary Consent by Participant:

By signing this consent form, you are agreeing that you have read it, or it has been read to you, you fully understand the contents of this document and consent to your child taking part in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By signing this form, you are agreeing that you are the legal parent or guardian of the child who wishes to participate in this study described to you by Ashley Goodlett.

Participant's Parent/Legal Guardian's Signature

Date

APPENDIX C
STUDENT ASSENT FORM

Study Title: Voices of Bloomsdale: A Student-Centered and Asset-Based Approach to Understanding the Experiences of Academically Successful African American Middle School Students

Hello. My name is Mrs. Goodlett.

What is this about?

I would like to talk to you about school experiences in middle school. I want to learn about your thoughts on what helped you to be successful in school.

Did my parents say it was ok?

Your parent(s) said it was ok for you to be in this study and have signed a form like this one.

Why me?

We would like you to take part because you have received good grades in school and have been very successful in your classes.

What if I want to stop?

You do not have to say “yes”, if you do not want to take part. We will not punish you if you say “no”. Even if you say “yes” now and change your mind after you start doing this study, you can stop and no one will be mad at you.

What will I have to do?

You will have to participate in a 1 hour Zoom meeting with me and 4 other students that attend your school. During the Zoom meeting you, as well as the others in the group will answer interview questions about your school experiences.

Will anything bad happen to me?

Nothing bad will happen to you during the Zoom meetings.

Will anything good happen to me?

By being a participant in this study you are helping society understand more about students like you, such as what assists you in being successful in school.

Do I get anything for being in this study?

Unfortunately, you do not get anything for being in this study. However, you are contributing to research that has the potential to help a lot of other students similar to you.

What if I have questions?

You are free to ask questions at any time.

If you understand this study and want to be in it, please write your name below.

Signature of child

Date

APPENDIX D

RECRUITMENT LETTER

Hello. I am a doctoral student at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. However, I have worked in public schools for the past 14 years as a teacher and for the past five years as an Assistant Principal. You are receiving this letter today because you have a student that is excelling in school. I know that you are proud of their accomplishments, as you should. As we navigate these unprecedented times, it's great to stop occasionally and reflect on what is going well.

I am kindly requesting your child's participation in my doctoral research study. This study is titled: Voices of Bloomsdale: A Student-Centered and Asset-Based Approach to Understanding the Experiences of Academically Successful African American Middle School Students.

The purpose of this study is to give African American students a voice in discussing their academic success. The goal of the study is to understand how successful rural African American students perceive their experiences in school.

This study involves your child participating in one 1-hour Zoom focus group interview with 4 of their peers that also attend their school. Participation is completely voluntary, and participants may withdraw from the study at any time. Zoom focus group interviews will be scheduled at everyone's convenience.

Your child's participation in the research will be of great importance to assist in understanding the schooling experiences of African American middle school students, in an effort to learn what factors contribute to their success. I hope to use the findings of this research to make recommendations for both policy and practice that can potentially improve the schooling experiences of students of color.

For additional information or to enroll in this study, please call or text me at (336)307-9830 or email adgoodle@uncg.edu. I realize that you are busier than ever, navigating through this Covid-19 pandemic and continuing to assist your children with new remote learning platforms. I promise that your child's involvement in this research is worth the time to further highlight young African American student achievement! I look forward to hearing from you and Zoom meeting your child!

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Ashley Goodlett, Primary Investigator