

CHRISTIAN, SR., RONNIE DELANEY, Ed.D. African American Males . . . Educate or Suspend? (2020)

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The current body of literature indicates a large discipline disparity between African American males and other groups of students. This disparity has been an issue since the inception of school desegregation in the 1960s. The discipline disparity has been a national problem affecting African American males in public schools. In an effort to understand and address this issue, more research is warranted as a means of discovering additional solutions that educators can use in public schools.

The purpose of my study was to explore how African American male students who were on track to graduate as seniors experienced school discipline and suspension by answering the following questions:

1. What are the disciplinary experiences of African American male students who are on track to graduate as seniors?
 - a. What positive support systems did they have in school?
 - b. What disciplinary obstacles did they face and have to overcome in school?
2. What are strategies that administrators used to address/reduce the suspensions among African American males?
 - a. What are African American males' opinions of their teachers' and administrators' approaches to addressing discipline problems in their schools?

Using a basic qualitative approach with emphasis on interviews and observations, I found that African American male students experienced academic and behavior success

in school when educators implemented the following: (a) set high academic and behavior expectations, (b) built good student/teacher relationships, and (c) created a school and classroom environment that was culturally relevant for African American males.

Teachers who set high academic and behavior expectations for their African American male students experienced positive interactions with them. Such expectations allowed teachers to focus more on students' academic prowess instead of misconduct and other behavior concerns. Also, teachers who built good relationships with their students had reduced discipline referrals. Students who felt genuine concern from their teachers and experienced feelings of comfort in the classroom had a positive perception of acceptance towards educators. Additionally, African American males felt a level of comfort in schools because their teachers worked to create classroom environments that were culturally inclusive.

I also found that assistant principals used specific strategies to help African American males experience academic and behavior success at school. One strategy was employing a customized approach to working with African American male students. Each male was different and required unique methods to communicate. Assistant principals also used counseling strategies to help African American males resolve discipline issues. For example, assistant principals kept items such as Lego blocks in their offices for students to manipulate. This approach helped students calm down by using their hands to release stress so that they could think logically and clearly about the matter being addressed. Last, assistant principals believed that building positive rapport/relationships with African American males was the most effective means of dealing with

discipline issues. Assistant principals believed that good relationships with African American males provided them with a sense of parental care at school that many of them are missing at home.

AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES . . .
EDUCATE OR SUSPEND?

by

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This dissertation is dedicated to Freddie H. Brown, my grandmother, and Hattie B. Christian, my mother, who are no longer walking this earth, but are always walking with me in spirit. Their unyielding love and words of encouragement will always be an important part of me. Also, I dedicate this to Brianna and Ronnie, Jr., my children, always remember to catch your dreams in life . . . no matter what! I love you with every fiber of my being.

APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A decade after the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case *Brown v Board of Education* of 1954, public schools remained unequipped to educate minority students as demands for integration began. As a result of that ruling and efforts at school desegregation through busing, mainstream White families began moving to the suburbs, escaping what they described as forced integration. This process was commonly referred to as “White Flight” in the 1970s (Logan & Burdick-Will, 2017). With Whites leaving the inner-city schools, minority students, specifically African American males, found themselves to be the target of discipline issues in classrooms across the nation (Logan & Burdick-Will, 2017; Noguera, 2008). That trend is still prevalent in the 21st century. Reports from researchers such as Amerikaner and Morgan (2018) indicate that African American males are three times more likely to be suspended from school than Whites males or males from other racial subgroups. Additionally, research demonstrates that the education system for many of our African American males serves as a direct pipeline to the judicial systems and prison (N. Bryan, 2017; Noguera, 2008). N. Bryan (2017) reminds us that out-of-school suspensions involving African American males are a country-wide problem that requires immediate action.

Even today, then, after decades of research, we find that our education system still struggles to address high suspension rates among African American males. We know that

African American male students represent 16% of the student population, but approximately 32% of the students suspended or expelled. By comparison, White students also have a similar suspension rate, but they represent 51% of the student population (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). As an educator, I am troubled by these statistics. I am bound by my moral conscience to execute discipline to all students in a manner that is fair and impartial regardless of the student's race or gender.

My research project focused on educators' responses to the high rate of suspensions among African American males in high schools and, specifically, the ongoing challenge of disparity in suspensions of African American male students when compared to other groups. School systems are operating in a state of uncertainty regarding best practices to address African American male students' ongoing behavior issues. District and state educators want to ensure that African American males are extended the right of being disciplined "based on the behavior" and not due to factors such as the students' race and socioeconomic status (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). However, local, state, and national data suggest that educators (teachers and administrators) who enforce school board discipline policies misinterpret the actual intent of the policies or misapply those policies when they work with African American males during discipline situations (DeMatthews, 2016; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2012; Office of Civil Rights, 2010). Educators (teachers and school-based administrators) must be aware of the impact that their interpretation of policy has relative to the suspension rate among African American males.

With this disparity in mind, I conducted a basic qualitative research study at two high schools. I interviewed African American male students on schedule to graduate and who, throughout their high school years, might have experienced discipline issues. I interviewed them to inquire about the strategies they used and the obstacles they overcame in order to stay in school and on track to graduate. I gathered data from eight students from two schools. It was my personal and professional hope that the findings from my research study will inspire school board members to develop new discipline policies and personnel procedures that emphasize preventive measures and strategies that teachers and administrators can use with African American males in order to reduce the high suspension rates among the targeted group.

I was interested in this topic for personal and professional reasons. As an African American male who was never suspended from school, I found this issue to be troubling, embarrassing to some degree, and challenging as a professional who makes decisions on how to enforce the suspension policy in my role as an administrator. African American males have always faced public scrutiny regardless of the subject matter. They have been stereotyped and labeled based on the factors that many Whites do not understand (Noguera, 2008; Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). If they are physically imposing they must be an athlete; if they are articulate and communicate well, then they are trying to sound “White”; and if they constantly present a serious demeanor, then they must be angry people who are mad at the world (Bowman, Comer, & Johns, 2018; Ogbu, 2004).

With the current stereotypes that African American males face, I found it troubling to know that a number of our young men in schools are already “fighting the

battle” against stereotypes before they graduate from the public school system (Noguera, 2008; Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). Furthermore, I found this issue to be deeply concerning because many African American males are already “fighting battles” due to lack of parental guidance and a home life impacted by poverty. Research indicated that many African American males go to school from challenging circumstances at home (N. Bryan, 2017; Skiba, Horner, Chung, Rausch, May, & Tobin, 2011). Research further explained that African American males who come from high poverty neighborhoods are at a greater risk of acting out in the classroom and that suspension from school is almost inevitable (Carter, Skiba, Arredondo, & Pollock, 2017; Shirley & Cornell, 2011). When I think of this issue, I found myself asking the question: How do educators fix this situation? I am troubled because the answer to this question is not very clear. I am reminded that the issue has been ongoing for decades, and it will take more than a passing thought to put the right steps in place to address this problem.

Problem Statement

School board policy is developed as a means to support the academic development of students while serving as the foundational resource for school-based administrators (principals and assistant principals) to enforce discipline policies. Historical records suggest that there is a conflict between school board policy prescriptions for discipline referrals and how educators (teachers and administrators) actually enforce the policy prescriptions (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2012; Office of Civil Rights, 2010). This conflict has led to an imbalance in the suspension rates among students from different backgrounds. Specifically, throughout

North Carolina, there is a disproportionately high suspension rate for African American male students. For example, Winston-Salem/Forsyth County high school data indicated that during the school year 2009-2010, African American males accounted for 44% of the short-term suspensions, while White students' suspension rate was 17% and Hispanic students' 11.2% (Sherrill, 2013). The long-term suspension data during that year showed similar patterns with regards to African American males. The data illustrate that African American males accounted for 56% of the long-term suspensions, while White males contributed to 27% of the total and Hispanics males represented .09% (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2012). See Table 1.

Table 1

Suspension Rates by Race

Percentages	White Males	African American Males	Hispanic Males
% of District's Students	40.2	28.5	24.5
% of Short-term Suspensions	17.0	44.0	11.2
% of Long-term Suspensions	27.0	56.0	.9

Winston-Salem/Forsyth County high school discipline data mirrors a four-year trend that is prevalent throughout the state of North Carolina. The most recent data on African American males show an increase in short-term suspensions from 8,763 in 2013-2014 to 9,811 in 2014-2015. Also, there was an increase in expulsions from 4 in 2013-2014 to 6 in 2018 (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2018). According to the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2017), African American male high

school students throughout the state had the highest short-term and long-term suspension rates of any group of students. Data indicated that during the 2014-2015 school year, African American male students accounted for 118,105 short-term suspensions in comparison to White students who accounted for 54,812. More to the point, African American males' short-term suspension rate was 4.16% for every 10 students enrolled in comparison to White males' short-term suspension rate of 1.1% for every 10 students enrolled. The long-term suspension (LTS) data during the same year, 2014-2015, indicated a similar trend with African American male students receiving 601 LTS in comparison to White students who received 282 LTS. A closer look at the data indicated that African American males received long-term suspensions 153 times per 100,000 students, while the rate for White males' LTS was 37 per 100,000 students.

National data reports on African American male students are similar to the local and state data. The Office of Civil Rights (2012) reported that 20% of the nation's African American males in high schools were suspended in comparison to 12% of American Indians and 7% of White males. Research notes a few reasons for African American males receiving disproportionately high disciplinary referrals. One contributing factor is the number of African American males enrolled in a school. The Office of Civil Rights (2012) indicates that African American males accounted for 52% of the student population in large cities such as Montgomery County Public Schools (MD) and 30% of the student population in the state of North Carolina. From 2008 to 2010, the enrollment data trend in North Carolina remained the same. African American males represented 30% of the student population, and Whites represented 20.7%. A second factor is how

school-based administrators use suspension as the primary discipline strategy to handle the day-to-day disruptions African American males cause in the classroom (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Lindsay & Hart, 2017; Skiba et al., 2011).

The above data illuminates this study's central problem, which is the high suspension rates among African American male students in school districts locally as well as across the state and country. As the national data indicated, African American males are suspended twice the number of times when compared to any other race of students in high schools (Office of Civil Rights, 2010). I want to explore the roots of the suspension issue and possible solutions to the issue by interviewing African American males in two local high schools.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of my basic qualitative research study was to explore how African American male students, who are on track to graduate as seniors, experienced school discipline and suspensions. To understand the students' perspectives, I explored what they said about teachers' and administrators' methods for dealing with African American males who frequent the office for discipline reasons. Furthermore, through my research, I discussed with the African American males any attitude changes they made as a result of their disciplinary experiences in school. Additionally, I discussed with administrators their practices for handling disciplinary issues with African American males.

During my research study, I interviewed students to discuss their specific discipline issues, if any, and their relationships with school-based administrators relative to discipline encounters. Specifically, I was interested in discussing with students the

strategies administrators used when the students made poor behavior choices, including choices that resulted in discipline referrals. Additionally, I discussed with students the classroom environments (i.e., cultures) to determine if those variables contributed to lower disciplinary referrals and suspensions. Also, in my interviews with administrators, I focused specifically on processes and procedures they used to address the suspension disparity issues among African American males.

My hope in conducting this study was to learn in part what strategies that administrators used that aided African American males with their engagement in learning while reducing the number of discipline referrals they experienced. Existing research has demonstrated that African American males who feel comfortable in the classroom are more likely to be authentically engaged during instructional time (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Theobald, Eddy, Grunspan, Wiggins, & Crowe, 2017). In the end, I hope to document and share strategies that teachers and administrators used that were helpful in keeping African American males in the classroom, out of the principal's office, and on track to graduation.

Research Questions

My research questions for this study were:

1. What are the disciplinary experiences of African American male students who are on track to graduate as seniors?
 - a. What positive support systems did they have in school?
 - b. What disciplinary obstacles did they face and had to overcome in school?

2. What are the strategies that administrators used to address/reduce the suspensions among African American males?
 - a. What are African American males' opinions of their teachers' and administrators' approaches to addressing discipline problems in their schools?

Background Context

Research indicated several factors that explain the disproportionately high suspension rates for African American male students. These factors included the lack of culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom, racial biases among educators, and the need to train teachers on how to create well-structured classrooms that aid in academic productivity for African American male students (De Royston et al., 2017; Hope, Skoog, & Jagers, 2015; Iselin, 2010). Often teachers who have never taught African American males define the students' classroom behavior as aggressive, assuming it warrants disciplinary actions (Good & Lavigne, 2017; Gregory, Cornell, & Fan, 2011). Research also suggests that some teachers are not adequately trained by their school district to work with African American males (Gregory et al., 2010; Rezai-Rashti & Martino, 2017). Gregory et al. (2011) explained that teachers with limited training and low expectations for their students of color generated a high number of discipline referrals due to what they believe to be the students' lack of interest in learning.

To address behavior issues, some researchers recommended effective strategies used in public schools to decrease the suspension disparity among African American males. One strategy was the use of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) by classroom

teachers. Researchers explained that CRP could help teachers better understand the culture of African American males (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Warren, 2017). For example, African American males may react more positively to receiving direct instruction in comparison to indirect instruction. African American males are accustomed to direct instruction as a means of positive communication from their parents and other authority figures in their lives (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Warren, 2017). Another strategy that leads to positive outcomes was to set high academic and behavioral expectations for African American males. Milner (2017) explained that teachers who have low expectations for African American males tend to see low academic performances from them in the class. African American males are often bored in the classroom and resort to acting out behaviorally because of low expectations from the teachers.

Methods

The method used during my research was basic qualitative research that consisted of interviews for data collection purposes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I interviewed high school seniors, who were at least 18 years old, to collect data that provided insight into how they navigated discipline issues, if any, and stay on track to graduation. I conducted my study at two high schools. Eight seniors, five from one school and three from the other, and an assistant principal from each school, participated in my study. I selected students based on the following criteria: (a) African American males who wanted to volunteer and participate in the study, and (b) they were on track to graduate. Also, I interviewed an administrator (assistant principal) from each school in order to discuss their interpretations and use of policy when disciplining African American males.

To analyze the data, I first conducted a preliminary exploratory analysis. Creswell (2012) explained that this first step allows the researcher to get a “general sense of the data, memorize ideas, think about organization of the data and consider whether more data is needed” (p. 243). I then conducted open coding of my data in order to identify prominent themes from my study. By analyzing the interviews, I uncovered central themes regarding the schools’ support systems and strategies educators used to aid with school discipline issues. Additionally, I documented various obstacles that students reported that they faced during their high school years and noted how they worked with educators to overcome those obstacles.

Conceptual Framework

In my research review, I discovered five research-based strategies that educators can use to address the high suspension rates among African American male students. These best practices are as follows: (a) establishing high expectations, (b) a customized approach to student learning, (c) effective professional development for teachers in the area of classroom management, (d) effective student/teacher relationships, and (e) culturally relevant curriculum/leadership/climate. These five best practices constitute as my study’s conceptual framework. During my research I planned to explore and document if all five best practices were used in an effective manner to address the suspension disparity among African American male students. My goal was to document the best practices that my participants discussed and determine if there are common best practices used by teachers and administrators.

One best practice that several of the researchers referenced was the establishment of high academic and behavioral expectations for African American male students in the classroom. Blazar and Kraft (2017) believed that teachers could focus more on student learning and not student behavior when they set high expectations in the classroom. That approach also eliminated poor behavior among students because they were authentically engaged in classroom learning. Rezai-Rashti and Martino (2017) also noted in their research that teachers should have strong academic and behavior expectations for students of color. They believed that the use of high expectations in the classroom would increase the students' academic performance and reduce the number of suspensions among the targeted group. More to the point, Hope et al.'s (2015) research noted the importance of teachers having well-structured classrooms and the same expectations for all students in order to reduce suspension rates among African American males.

Another best practice was the idea of customizing the teaching approach to fit the learning needs of each African American male student. This approach was discussed by Chenoweth (2009) and Carter et al. (2017). They believed that all students in rural and urban schools would benefit from teachers that utilize a systematic approach consisting of customized learning strategies to meet the needs of every student in the classrooms. This technique could be used throughout the country in any school district, be it small or large. Hope et al. (2015) also subscribed to the notion that customized learning strategies would optimize student learning among African American males. They believed that the school district should provide teachers with the required resources that will ensure a cultural

climate is established that consists of customized learning strategies for African American males.

Iselin (2010) discussed the idea of tailoring curricula to ensure that they aligned with the needs of the male students. She further believed that the use of comprehensive need assessments is the appropriate method that schools should use for the tailoring process. Similarly, R. E. Lee (2018) agreed that customized teaching is the right approach for African American males. His research suggested that teachers use three methods to teach African American males. First, the teacher must create a family and community like environment in the classroom. This is done by allowing the students to get to know each other and to build friendships based on their family and community similarities. Second, the teacher must show that he or she cares about their students' academic progress. Also, the teacher has to use certain verbal communication and positive affirmations when talking with students.

Effective professional development training that prepares teachers to understand better African American male students' behavior was the third best practice described in my readings. Fischer et al. (2018) recommended that teachers in Title I schools be well-trained on the use of effective classroom management strategies as a means to reduce the number of discipline referrals among their African American male students. Also, Gibson, Wilson, Haight, Kayama, and Marshall's (2014) research, relative to the high suspension rates among African American male students, indicated that school districts should invest in appropriate training for teachers so that they are well equipped to handle any type of behavior exhibited in the classroom. Furthermore, R. E. Lee (2018)

advocated for the use of culturally responsive training for teachers as a means to reduce suspension issues among African American students during instruction time. Gregory et al. (2010) also suggested that teachers be well trained in understanding the dynamics of relationships with African American males and how those relationships are paramount for students of color to experience a strong relationship with their teachers. More to the point, teachers who are well trained will develop classroom settings that are structured in a way that keeps African American males on task; this would help reduce their number of disciplinary referrals (Gregory et al., 2011).

The creation of positive student and teacher relationships is an additional best practice documented as a way to reduce the suspension rates among African American male students. Howard, Douglas, and Warren (2016) explained that teachers must show African American males that they care about them as a person and not just as another student. Also, research conducted by Gibson et al. (2014) and Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis (2016) discussed that good rapport with African American male students will help teachers reduce disciplinary issues in the classroom. The establishment of a positive learning culture is also essential in the reduction of suspensions among African American males. According to Noguera (2008), it is the teacher's responsibility, regardless of their race, to ensure that the classroom climate is positive and inviting for African American males. However, it is also imperative that the teacher takes into account the classroom structure and the students' culture when creating the classroom environment. If the established classroom culture conflicts with the African American males' cultural beliefs, an internal conflict might arise within the student to assimilate or reject the culture

(Noguera, 2003). More to the point, the teacher must create an environment that is nurturing and caring for African American males (Conchas & Noguera, 2004). Ideally, the relationship between the African American male and the teacher should be as fluid as the teacher's relationship with White students. This will only come to fruition when the classroom environment reflects a culture that supports all students. The premise of a strong student and teacher relationship has been well documented in articles about African American males who were categorized as low performing, special education, etc. With that in mind, Fischer et al. (2018) explained in their exploratory study that African American males' behaviors and academic performance increased when they experienced a positive climate in the classroom and the student/teacher relationship.

Last, the use of cultural diversity strategies such as culturally responsive leadership, culturally responsive curriculum, and establishing a culturally responsive environment are best practices for teachers to have success working with African American male students. Khalifa et al. (2016) discussed how it is the responsibility of the principal to establish a culturally diverse school climate. They further noted that it is up to the principal to embrace this approach and be an advocate for it daily. Additionally, researchers have noted that the use of culturally relevant curricula can help teachers with keeping African American males actively engaged in learning and assist the principal with ensuring the school is culturally-friendly for African American male students. Howard et al. (2016) explained that a culturally relevant environment is accepting of all African American male students and proves to appreciate cultural differences all students bring. When African American males feel that they are fully accepted by their teachers in

the classroom, the level of engagement during instructional time increases. Their engagement in learning reflects their teachers' abilities to institute culturally relevant practices in the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Teachers with good culturally relevant pedagogy will help students make connections between the text and their respective communities. Khalifa et al. (2016) also suggested that teachers who employ culturally relevant pedagogy encourage students to learn collaboratively while incorporating a student-to-student approach to classroom learning. Moreover, they discussed the importance of rapport-building with the African American student as vital to their learning and behavior in the classroom.

Khalifa et al. (2016) explained that the lack of culturally responsive pedagogy is a contributing factor to the suspension rates among African American male students. They recommended that educators focus on three areas of (a) academic success, (b) cultural competence, and (c) sociopolitical consciousness to address the suspension rate issue further. Academic success is defined as a concentration on academic growth that students make in the classroom as a result of instruction. In contrast, the focus on cultural competence refers to the recognition of their individual culture while they are studying and learning about new cultures during classroom instruction time. Moreover, the term sociopolitical consciousness refers to students using what they have learned in the classroom and applying it to real-world problems in order to analyze and attempt to solve them.

Saifer, Edwards, Ellis, Ko, and Stuczynski (2011) and Khalifa et al. (2016) recommended the use of culturally responsive materials in the classroom environment as

a means to reduce suspensions among African American males. They discussed how this material would give students a sense of belonging and emotional safety during the learning process. Another means of creating a diverse culture in the classroom centers around teachers engaging in conversation with their students about families and community programs. This will help teachers understand each asset the students possess. The goal of using culturally relevant strategies is to ensure the sustainability of cultural practices that support the changing identities of our African American males in our public education system. According to Paris and Alim (2014), “culturally sustaining pedagogy helps keep pace with the changing lives and practices of youth of color” (p. 85).

In this section, I discussed my conceptual framework, which consists of five research-based strategies that researchers have explored and studied relative to African American male students. Each strategy is unique yet complementary; they all emphasize increasing the academic achievement of African American males while reducing the suspension rates that the students face. I believe that each strategy is a defining piece of the “whole” puzzle that contributes to African American males receiving a quality education. A teacher who uses the listed strategies, as discussed above, will educate students holistically with a combination of methods that consist of social, emotional, and intellectual resources. Gregory et al. (2010) discussed how the education of African American males is unique and requires an approach that does not conflict with African American male self-identity. I believe that teachers who subscribe to these five strategies in the classroom will assist African American males with their maturation in an

environment that is positive, academically productive, and accepting of them as equals. I revisit my conceptual framework in Chapter V to aid in my analysis of findings.

Researcher Experience/Role in the Study

I have served as a high school assistant principal for 8 years. During that time, I have worked with many African American males with disciplinary issues. Those issues ranged from minor infractions, such as a student cutting class, to major offenses, such as a student under the influence of a controlled substance on school grounds. During those experiences, I found that African American males' attitudes and behaviors varied. Some expressed extreme remorse, while others appeared unconcerned about the consequences that followed their actions. Also, my role allows me to work closely with teachers who refer students for discipline issues. Some of those experiences shaped my opinion that some teachers struggle with and are not equipped with the knowledge base necessary to manage a classroom of African American males. I can recall conversations with teachers when they adamantly conveyed feelings of being unprepared to work with young African American males. Not only did some teachers describe their unpreparedness, but parents also communicated the same sentiment during telephone conversations. Mothers also communicated that the absence of a father figure in the home was a major problem for their sons' behavior and decision-making relative to behavior choices at school.

With my professional experiences in mind, my role as a researcher was to conduct this study with a focus on learning from students and administrators what strategies educators used that kept African American males on track in the classroom and out of the principal's office. I believe that my main objective as a researcher was to provide a

platform for the students' and administrators' voices to be heard about discipline experiences. I conducted my study with the hopes of sharing information that will bring about new approaches and policies for teachers and administrators to use when their African American males are faced with discipline. I hope that the new approaches and policies will reduce the suspension rates among this group locally, statewide, and nationally.

Study Significance

My study is important for several reasons. It focuses on the students' perceptions of the problem. From my review of research, I found numerous studies that spoke to the problem primarily from an adult point of view. My study allowed me the opportunity to gather data relevant to the problems and possible solutions that are based on the students' perspectives and experiences. I hoped that the study would motivate the participants to discuss and suggest innovative ways to further reduce the suspension rates among African American males.

My study is also important because it addressed the social injustices that many African American males face as a result of their participation in some North Carolina public schools. A social injustice takes place when those who are equal are treated unequally. With that in mind, African American males have been the target of social injustice in the field of education since the inception of public schools (Murtadha & Watts, 2005). Because of the social injustice surrounding the suspension disparity issue, I researched the causes of this problem and potential solutions to it.

Overview of Chapters

My dissertation focuses on the suspension experiences that African American male students encountered in public high schools. In Chapter I, I provided an introduction to my topic, and in Chapter II, I focus on a review of research literature related to African American males' experiences with suspension. In Chapter III, I discuss the research methods I used to conduct the study and collect relevant data. In Chapter IV, I present my findings in the form of participants' stories and experiences related to the obstacles they faced with discipline issues, how they motivated themselves to graduate, and what strategies educators (teachers and administrators) used to help keep them on track to graduate. In Chapter V, I analyze my results concerning existing research and explain the significance and implications of my study.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

By seeking out the voices of African American male students, I sought to study their experiences with discipline in high school and the strategies that educators used to reduce the suspensions among African American male students. Since the ruling in the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) case that eventually led to the desegregation of public schools, African American males have experienced suspensions related to their exhibited behavior in the classroom. Research showed that for decades, African American males have been removed from the classroom and sent home for minor infractions (Darby & Rury, 2017; Skiba et al., 2014). The data in the school district where I work resembles the local, state, and national data that indicated that African American males were at twice the risk of receiving some form of suspension from high school than their White peers. Our data showed that African American males made up less than 3% of the school's enrollment, yet they accounted for more than 70% of the discipline referrals and suspensions (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2012). In my role as a school-based administrator, I am aware that there is a direct correlation between a student's academic performance and his or her attendance. With that in mind, I know that the more a student is suspended from school, the greater the likelihood will be that he or she will fall behind academically. This was concerning to me as an educator who works in a school that stresses the importance of good attendance.

In this chapter, I review existing research related to the suspension issue by focusing on the reasons why some African American males were suspended so frequently. I also review research related to strategies intended to prevent suspensions, especially of African American males.

Causes of High Suspension Rates

Research studies throughout the 20th and 21st centuries indicated that there are many contributing factors to the high suspension rates among African American males. Nine contributing factors that researchers have identified are (a) perceptions, (b) abuse and neglect, (c) classroom culture, (d) poverty, (e) school board policy, (f) antiquated behavior management strategies, (g) lack of classroom structure, (h) cultural biases, and (i) poor student/teacher relationships. Researchers have indicated that African American males are victims to short-term and long-term suspensions in high schools regardless of enrollment numbers, school location, or socioeconomic status (J. Bryan, Day-Vines, Griffin, & Moore-Thomas, 2012; Darby & Rury, 2017; T. Lee, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2011).

Perceptions

Pane, Rocco, Miller, and Salmon (2014), Skiba et al. (2011), and Welsh and Little (2018) explained that one reason for the discipline disparity was the perceptions of teachers and principals when they are considering discipline. Teachers and principals have morale and values that were engrained into them by their parents during their formative years. It is difficult as a person to not refer to one's "up-bringing" when working with people. Welsh and Little (2018) further explained that because of

administrators' personal perceptions as a factor during discipline matters, policymakers are given more attention to the disproportionalities of school discipline. Their study provided a review of the literature, and it noted that race, gender, income disparities, and perceptions contributed to the disciplinary outcomes of African American males in schools. Welsh and Little's (2018) findings indicated that there were many causes for the disparities. Their study reminds us that impoverished African American male students experience suspensions and expulsions at higher rates than their peers; however, the differences are not based solely on socioeconomics or misbehavior. They explained that school board policies, classroom practices, and educators' perspectives are key to explaining the disparities. This is important because some educators perceive African American males as inferior beings who are incapable of learning.

Kunesh and Noltemeyer (2015) discussed in their research three perceptions of the disproportionate discipline among African American males in public schools. They are as follows: (a) race-based bias, (b) cultural miscommunication, and (c) socioeconomic status. These perceptions are engrained in educators due to several factors. Kunesh and Noltemeyer (2015) explained through their empirical research on disciplinary disproportionality that teachers' disciplinary decisions about African American males might be biased. In many instances, teachers form negative stereotypes about African American males based on unconscious thoughts or conscious prejudice. Their research explained how the media perpetuates negative stereotypes of African American males by pairing their faces with negative names and incidents. Also, the life domains of Whites and African Americans reinforce stereotypes and biases and cause

disparities. Additionally, housing preferences among African Americans and White Americans further perpetuate biases and cause segregation in school choices. As a result of housing preferences, there is a limited amount of contact and communication between White and African Americans. According to Kunesh and Noltemeyer (2015), a lack of interaction leaves many White Americans with few positive experiences to counteract negative stereotypes and biases they have of African American males.

Additionally, experimental research has shown that teachers' perceptions are critical to the level of behavioral expectations and academic capabilities placed on African American males in the classroom. Furthermore, teachers' and administrators' personal biases account for the disciplinary disparity among African American male students. Amodio and Devine (2006) and Bryan (2017) explained that teachers and administrators are not aware that their personal biases influence their decision making during the discipline of African American males due to implicit or unintentional racial bias. In many situations, White educators are oblivious to what they are doing wrong during their interactions with African American male students.

Finally, it was noted that the greatest degree of disproportionality in suspensions existed for minor offenses that left disciplinary actions to the discretion of the administrator (Fabelo et al., 2011; Skiba, 2015). According to Skiba (2015), administrators incorporate their professional and personal judgment when handling minor offenses involving African American male students. Kunesh and Noltemeyer (2015) also explained that African American males' very active learning styles accompanied by their use of loud voices are often misconstrued by their White teachers as representing

insubordinate or disruptive classroom behavior. Additionally, their research indicated that African American males who grew up in poverty had a high number of discipline referrals. He went on to say that despite almost 40 years of research, the data suggest that to effectively address racial inequity, educators must pay specific attention to the issues of race and culture in our schools.

Abuse and Neglect

Another factor for the suspension disparity was the level of abuse and neglect that some African American males suffer. This issue was well documented nationally by many researchers who study the suspension issue among African American male students. Mason (2013) noted that one-third of students with a history of abuse and neglect are suspended from school. Ten percent of high school students who received suspensions have experienced abuse and neglect in their life. African American males are expelled or suspended 50% more because of neglect or abuse issues (Petras, Masyn, Buckley, Ialongo, & Kellam, 2011; Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). Those experiences present themselves as poor behavior choices in school (Skiba et al., 2011; Thompson, 2010; Wood, 2015). Cameron (2006) and Neal (2017) explained that the disciplinary consequences African American males received for misbehaving in school often contributes to their development of serious behavior disorders and impedes their potential to become a productive adult in the community. Research shows that African American males who experience repeat adverse disciplinary actions in schools and abuse at home are at greater risk of becoming involved in the judicial system as an adolescent and later into adulthood (Mallett, 2017).

Additionally, African American males who experience adverse discipline experiences in school and abuse in the home often develop a distorted view of their sense of belonging. They become disconnected from their peers involved in positive activities and embrace those violating the laws and involved in drugs, gangs, and criminal activity (Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). Because of their experiences, African American males often rebel against positive contributions to the community as an adolescent or adult.

According to Kupchik and Catlaw (2015), African American males who have negative disciplinary experiences and suffers abuse are often citizens who do not believe in the democratic process. Their study concluded that African American males with a history of school suspension are less likely than others to vote and volunteer in civic activities later in life. Kupchik and Catlaw (2015) also explained that their findings were consistent with previous research that highlighted the long-term adverse effects of punitive disciplinary policies and the role schools have preparing youth to be involved in the democratic process. Hattar (2018) and Neal (2017) also explained that the neglect African American males encounter has a detrimental effect on their learning and decision-making skills in school.

Price, Chiapa, and Walsh (2013) and Behere, Basnet, and Campbell (2017) explained that the lack of a strong family structure was the reason for the psychological and physical neglect that children experience. However, many single mothers of African American males have embraced their role as the family structure and have committed themselves to their son's achievement in school. These mothers believe that active involvement in the school is critical to reducing the discipline concerns and increasing

their sons' academics. According to Allen and White-Smith (2017), single mothers of African American males have to be proactive and work in collaboration with teachers and administrators in schools to improve their sons' situations. This means frequent conversations with teachers, including monitoring attendance/grades and scheduled meetings with the principal to discuss any concerns (Allen & White-Smith, 2017). Allen and White-Smith (2017) noted that single parents could be successful in their role with the assistance of school educators. According to Price et al. (2013), educators can contribute to the psychological safety and success their students are missing. The psychologically safe environment in school replaces the "safety net" missing in the students' home life. In order for students to be productive in life, they must have a sense of parental protection and support (Weir, 2016). Research further explains that students who feel safe in their school climate among teachers and administrators tend to make good behavior choices in school and perform well academically (Hinojosa, 2008; Weir, 2016).

Classroom Culture

Researchers also noted that teachers and administrators have done a poor job of creating a classroom and school culture that welcomes African American male students. They described how some school teachers' lack of cultural awareness has a detrimental effect on African American males' perspectives in the classroom (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Sleeter, 2016). Sleeter (2016) explained that African American male students tend to bring different experiences and perspectives to the classroom than most Whites' students. This is problematic for White teachers. Many White preservice teachers

anticipate working with White children and have very little knowledge or experience working cross-culturally (Sleeter, 2016). In many cases, the White preservice teachers are naïve and have stereotypic beliefs about African American males, such as believing that African American males bring behaviors to class that are disruptive and aggressive. According to Sleeter (2016), most White preservice teachers have little awareness or understanding of discrimination or racism and no real concept of social change. Researchers found that White preservice teachers believe that social change does not encompass changing the structural inequalities and programs to remedy racial discrimination. Sleeter (2016) further explained that White preservice teachers use colorblindness as a way of coping with fear and ignorance relative to their lack of knowledge; thus, a negative impact on their instruction in the classroom is inevitable.

Additionally, preservice teachers tend to have limited visions of multicultural teaching and struggle in the classroom in implementing multicultural curriculum to their existing curriculum (Khalifa et al., 2016). Furthermore, many preservice teachers are ambivalent about their ability to teach African American males, and their feelings of efficacy seem to decline once they are in the classroom (Sleeter, 2016). Many White teachers embody this cause and effect relationship, and the results are schools with poorly established cultures that often lead to poor classroom structures and high suspension rates among African American males (Khalifa et al., 2016). Gregory et al. (2011) and Carter et al. (2017) explained in their studies that the suspension rate was significantly higher for African American males when the school culture did not reflect any of their traditions. They further explained that White teachers are still implementing traditional practices to

structure classrooms, thus creating a classroom environment for African American males that is detrimental. Additional to that, Carter et al. (2017) indicated that old stereotypes of African American males are still used in current classrooms to set the level of behavior and academic expectations. These are the same stereotypes that were developed through centuries of oppression and discrimination that contributed to lowered expectations for many African American males' academic abilities and behavior. Research findings revealed that 58.9% of African American and White subjects endorsed at least one stereotypical view of the difference in inborn ability (Carter et al., 2017).

As recent research on implicit bias shows, those stereotypes are still widespread in U.S. culture (Gonzalez, 2015). According to Gonzalez (2015), many studies on implicit biases have found that their participants associate African American male faces with negative words such as “poison” or “cancer.” His research further explained that study participants often implicitly associate African American males and apes, a parallel that symbolizes violence against African American males. Skiba and Arredondo (2017) concluded that the negative and controlling images of the “deviant” African American male developed hundreds of years ago. It is still the basis for the discrimination, oppression, and biases our current African American male students encounter. Research shows that these stereotypes have profound consequences, including a disruption in the schooling of many African American males (Gonzalez, 2015).

To combat the stereotypes and biases, the classroom environment must be non-traditional with high expectations for African American males. Researchers have defined a positive classroom culture as one with “norms, values and expectations that make

students feel safe, emotionally secure and motivated to learn” (Shirley & Cornell, 2011, p. 117). When students believe that a positive classroom culture exists, they make better socioemotional adjustments.

Poverty

A fourth reason noted for the problem of disproportionality in the suspension of African American males is poverty. Researchers believe that African American males who come from impoverished families have a higher probability of being suspended from school (N. Bryan, 2017; Gregory et al., 2011; Skiba et al., 2011; Skiba et al., 2014). Research further indicates that most teachers are White middle class and have limited conceptions of poverty and the problems associated with it. Their lack of knowledge hinders the relationship between the African American male student and his White teacher (Mallett, 2017). White teachers lack the informed empathy needed to work with impoverished African American male students. White students in the classroom often witness a lack of empathy. Research noted that White students who witness negative interactions between their White teacher and African American males tend to develop a negative impression of how African American males should be treated (N. Bryan, 2017). This experience further perpetuates low expectations from and of African American male peers.

Petras, Masyn, Buckley, Ialongo, and Kellam (2011) and N. Bryan (2017) explained that students of color from low socioeconomic status are disproportionately disciplined compared to White Americans who live in poverty. Their studies also indicated that national data confirms that African American males are more likely to live

in poverty, which is a vital factor in their discipline outcomes and suspension disparity that African American males face (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2012; Sleeter, 2016).

Sleeter (2016) explained that in order to address the suspension disparity among African American male students, the issue of poverty should be strongly considered a major factor. Poverty affects not only the discipline rates among African American males, but it also impacts their academic achievements. Rutkowski, Rutkowski, Wild, and Burroughs (2018) conducted their academic achievement study using the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) data. PISA estimates achievement for USA students who live in poverty. Their study found that USA students in poverty have noticeable deficiencies in education when compared to or matched with middle-class students. Their study findings also indicated that students in poverty were expected to perform nearly 28 points, or one-fourth of a standard deviation lower, on the PISA assessment.

Similarly, Hattar (2018) conducted a study of the performance of 400 African American male students in a 2015 cohort of eight high schools on the New York State Algebra Regents exam. She analyzed the data to determine whether the suspension of African American males from school had an impact on them achieving a passing score on an exam. Hattar (2018) found that the social and economic challenges African American males faced, when compared to their White and Hispanic peers, led to limited educational opportunities, challenges with obtaining employment prospects, and a higher probability of incarceration. Her study further suggested that African American male students who

were consistently suspended produced lower scores on the Algebra regents as compared to their African American male peers who were not suspended.

McLoughlin and Noltemeyer (2010) also researched suspension issues among African American males in urban schools. Their research indicated that there were four identifying variables for the disparity in suspension rates between African American males and White students that have a cultural significance: (a) the economic status of students, (b) office disciplinary referrals, (c) the number of African-American students, and (d) the number of African-American teachers. They reported that poverty was a primary contributing factor to African American males' stress levels and their behavior in school in which teachers need training to address. More to the point, Title I schools have the highest suspension rates among African American males.

Poverty, racial bias, cultural differences and school board policy are well-documented challenges African American males faced in public schools. These factors are also significant in determining the discipline gap between African American and White males (Carter et al., 2017; Gregory et al., 2010).

School Board Policy Issues

Researchers have documented the misinterpretation of school board policy by school administrators as a reason that African American males are punished for their behavior displayed in the classroom. Researchers asserted that African American males were being suspended for minor infractions such as classroom disruptions rather than for more serious incidents. Scott, Hirn, and Barber (2012), for example, explained that African American male students in nine South Florida districts were 48% more likely to

be suspended than White students. In those schools, African American males received out of school suspension (OSS) 43.9% of the time, while White male students received OSS 33.1% for similar incidents. The same subjective use of school board policy was reported in urban mid-western public schools. Discipline data for 19 mid-western schools indicated that African American males accounted for 68.5% of the suspensions in comparison to White males, who accounted for 30.9% (Skiba et al., 2002). Data from Denver, Colorado indicated a similar pattern. Wadhwa (2010) reported that African American males in Denver schools were two or three times more likely to be suspended, thus placing them on a track to eventual incarceration. Similarly, Virginia's public school data showed that African American males had a suspension rate 13% higher than White males for the same incidents (Virginia Department of Education, 2013). National data indicated that African American males accounted for the second largest population of students in public schools, but they received the most suspensions during the school year (Anfinson, Autumn, Lehr, Riestenberg, & Scullin, 2010). These data further support the idea that our public schools are a road filled with disciplinary obstacles for African American males who lack the parental and/or educational support to navigate through the education system.

Relatedly, Fenning et al. (2008) and Rumberger and Losen (2016) postulated that in order to reduce the suspension disparity among African American males, school board policy must be revised so that it does not essentially target African American males, children of poverty, or children with academic challenges. Fenning and Bohanon (2006) and Gregory, Skiba, and Mediratta (2017) explained that traditional school board policy

is written in a manner that ensures consequences are very punitive towards African American males. So that school board policy does not target African American male students, researchers suggest that board policy be revised to include a proactive approach that prioritizes intervention and prevention strategies (Fenning, Wilczynski, & Parraga, 2000; Gregory et al., 2010; Skiba & Losen, 2016).

Antiquated Behavior Management Strategies

The ineffective and outdated behavior management strategies that are used as interventions have a detrimental effect on discipline rates among African American males. Gregory et al. (2011) and DeMatthews (2016) explained that African American male students were the victims of antiquated school policies that do not address their classroom behavioral needs. According to DeMatthews's (2016) study, the use of zero-tolerance policies is disproportionately used against African American male students and other marginalized groups. His findings suggest that school boards explore new discipline policy, address the issues of racism in schools, and seek community engagement to help reduce the suspension disparity among African American males and White peers. DeMatthews (2016) further suggested that principal preparation be revised to ensure that principals are culturally aware and knowledgeable with best practices needed to serve the African American male population in their school.

Von Frank (2010) and Carter et al. (2017) explained that schools neither have adequate strategies in place, such as one-to-one coaching strategies, to address the behavior issues African American males display in the classroom nor the racism that exists. Carter et al. (2017) further explained that the issues of racial/ethnic stereotypes are

still a vital part of the behavior strategies instituted in our present-day school discipline practices. They contend that old patterns continue to be reinforced through the ongoing processes of implicit bias and colorblindness.

Carter et al. (2017) suggest that to effectively address inequity in the behavior strategies, the role of race must be acknowledged, and racial disparities in discipline addressed. This may involve students as a catalyst on this matter; thus, a student-led approach to developing discipline policies and procedures is recommended (Day-Vines & Terriquez, 2008; Gregory et al., 2017). This approach allows students to take a personal and accountable approach to their social and academic progress while working with school personnel to address the concern (Galassi & Akos, 2007; Gregory et al., 2017). Gregory et al. (2017) further suggest that to increase school discipline equity and improve behavior strategies, school districts should implement a framework that helps educators address student behavior in a developmentally appropriate manner, thus reducing the race and gender disparities in school discipline in their schools. Additionally, in order for schools to address the suspension disparity issue due to outdated policy, some researchers explained that school board policies have to be fair and the punishments be the same for all students that misbehave. Skiba et al. (2011) explained that “direct efforts in policy, practice and research to address ubiquitous racial and ethnic disparities in school discipline” is needed (p. 85). Such strategies supported suspension for minor infractions such as disruptive behavior.

Similarly, Green et al. (2015) suggest that school districts consider using a 5-point multicomponent intervention system to address the inequity of discipline. Green et al.

(2015) explained that the 5-point system focuses on the following to ensure fair discipline for African American male students: (a) engaging instruction, (b) school-wide PBIS as a foundation for culturally-responsive behavior support, (c) use of disaggregated discipline data, (d) equity policies, and (e) reducing bias in discipline decisions. I believe that the implementation of effective behavior management strategies is pivotal in addressing the discipline disparity issue among African American male students. Sound behavior strategies employed will set the foundation for teachers to create a classroom structure that aligns systematically.

Classroom Structure

Gregory et al. (2011) and Wood (2015) explained that African American males need classroom settings that are structured in a way that increases their engagement and their level of academic involvement. This approach should involve structuring classrooms to meet the cultural needs of all students for engagement and leverage professional development practices learned by teachers (Stubbs, 2012; Wood, 2015). Wood (2015) explained in his study how students could “self-identify” with the various issues in the classroom that disrupted or rewarded them during academic engagement. According to Kinsler (2013) and Parsons (2017), educators can implement a School-Wide Positive Behavior System (SWPBS) in order to increase the academic and social success of African American males while reducing the suspension rates among this group.

Parsons (2017) explained that African American males are overrepresented in disciplinary sanctions. Her approach to combat this issue involves school personnel

implementing a behavioral intervention and support system that serves as a culturally responsive model to address the cultural needs of African American males in the classroom. The Culturally Responsive-SWPBS model consists of six practices that can help teachers respond more appropriately to their students' behavior and academic needs. The six culturally responsive practices as follows: (a) cultural knowledge, (b) cultural self-awareness, (c) validation of others' cultures, (d) cultural relevance, (e) cultural validity, and (f) cultural equity. Parsons (2017) further explained that each practice provides a framework for a progression model that enhances school climate and student engagement while reducing discipline problems. If new strategies are not implemented and teachers continue to operate in the classroom without structure, school districts will continue to experience high rates of discipline infractions among African American male students (Fenning & Bohanon, 2006; Parsons, 2017).

Gregory and Weinstein (2008) and Day, Gu, and Sammons (2016) explained that the classroom environment should begin with trust. African American males' behavior and attitude in the classroom become unproductive and possibly disruptive when the teachers appeared to be untrustworthy. According to Day et al. (2016), the "trust" factor starts with the principal's willingness to trust his teachers in the classroom. School leaders need to model the behavior they ultimately expect from the teacher in the classroom. When teachers appear untrustworthy, students are more defiant and less cooperative during instruction time (Binning et al., 2019; Egalite & Kisida, 2018). Binning et al. (2019) suggested that teachers should use self-affirmations to build trust among students and to combat the defiant behavior. They concluded that periodic self-

affirmation exercises delivered by classroom teachers improve students' trust and behavior. The Binning et al. (2019) study further concluded that students who consistently wrote affirmation essays about their personal life had a lower rate of discipline incidents. Their analyses of the student climate indicated that weekly affirmations were associated with higher school trust over time and partially affected discipline. To address the issue of defiance, researchers also believe that segregated schools and classrooms are ideal environments for reducing the suspension disparity issue among African American males in public schools.

Pei, Forsyth, Teddlie, Asmus, and Stokes (2013) explained that African American males who attended all-Black schools had a lower percentage of behavioral problems in the classroom than those in desegregated schools. Liou and Rotheram-Fuller's (2019) study indirectly supports the idea of Black schools. They explained that education reforms have been designed to improve academic achievement for all students, including African American males. But factors prohibit the success of those initiatives for African American males such as teacher expectations. Liou and Rotheram-Fuller's (2019) case study examined student and teacher perspectives on an urban high school reform and how it was experienced within the classroom by African American male students. Their findings suggested that African American male students had a strong sense of identity in school. However, they continued to face low academic expectations in the classroom despite the school's effort of equity. As previously stated, the lack of classroom structure presents a daily challenge for both the teacher and the African American male students. In part due to low teacher expectations and the disengagement by African American

males. With this in mind, educating African American students apart from other races may prove to be a solution to address the cultural bias that exists in the present school climate.

Cultural Biases

Monroe (2009) and Khalifa et al. (2016) argued that teachers and principals must be aware of their cultural biases and the negative impact such biases have on African American male students. This is important to note because many White teachers and principals are not prepared to handle cross-cultural issues that arise in the school. However, it is the role of the principal to ensure that teachers are prepared to handle such issues and that the school climate is culturally acceptable for African American males. Khalifa et al. (2016) explained in their study that principals have to be instructional and transformative leaders. Khalifa et al. (2016) stated that school leaders who implemented a strategic plan to support a positive school culture for African American males saw fewer discipline referrals among that group of students. The plan consists of four focal points: (a) critical self-awareness, (b) culturally responsive curricula and teacher preparation, (c) culturally responsive and inclusive school environments, and (d) engaging students and parents in community contexts as a means to change cultural biases in schools.

Critical self-awareness. Khalifa et al. (2016) explained that the principal should be fully aware of his/her values, beliefs, and/or dispositions towards African American male students. The principal must be critical and conscious of the culture he or she establishes as the foundation of his or her school. It is also imperative that principals use

their understanding of self to envision and create a new culture of learning for African American male students who have been marginalized (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Culturally responsive curricula and teacher preparation. Khalifa et al.'s (2016) study also argued that teachers are primarily not culturally responsive and lack access to needed culturally responsive teacher training programs. Culturally responsive teacher education preparation is needed for all teachers regardless of culture or race. It is the responsibility of the principal to have conversations with teachers about their assumptions that race has on classroom instruction.

Culturally responsive and inclusive school environments. Khalifa et al. (2016) also explained that the principal must promote a culturally responsive school concept with an emphasis on the inclusion of African American male students to combat cultural biases. This means challenging and supporting teachers who have a pattern of high discipline referrals for African American male students when compared to the referrals of White male students.

Engaging students and parents in community contexts. Khalifa et al. (2016) further discussed the importance of principals engaging students, families, and communities in culturally appropriate ways to address cultural biases in the schools. Principals should work with teachers to promote school/community programs and create spaces in the school for African American male students to use for student identities and behaviors, for example, Black History Month or Honor roll grades postings.

Regardless of the strategies to address the cultural biases in schools, many White teachers prefer to work in suburban schools teaching White middle-class students (Carter

et al., 2017; Nieto, 2000). In part, teachers perceive African American males' behavior in the classroom to be more disruptive than the behavior of non-Black students (Caton, 2012; DeMatthews, 2016). Research notes that teachers enter the educational field from various socioeconomic backgrounds and engrained with family morals, values, and traditions. It is their lack of personal and professional encounters with individuals who are ethnically, linguistically, and racially different from them that leads to negative student-teacher interactions (Khalifa et al., 2016). This is a major challenge for White teachers working with a diverse population of students. Milner (2011) and Khalifa et al. (2016) explained that teachers who were unfamiliar with diverse students and cultures were not prepared to function effectively in multiracial schools. Research further explains that African American male students become disengaged in learning and become disruptive when they know that White teachers cannot relate to their behaviors, language, or learning capabilities (Mowen & Brent, 2016; Townsend, 2000). The cultural differences of teachers adversely affect the teacher/student relationship that is paramount to the African American male students' academics and behavior in the classroom.

Relationships

McLoughlin and Noltemeyer (2010) and Broome and Davis (2017) noted that the relationship between the teacher and the African American male student has widespread ramifications. As previously mentioned, African American male students are faced with negative perspectives and low academic and behavioral expectations set by teachers. This speaks to the dynamics of why the student/teacher relationship is important to the overall success of African American males in school. Researchers also believe that African

American males need programs in the school that strengthen educational relationships with their institutions (Ford & Moore, 2013; Carter et al., 2017). Carter et al. (2017) explained that programs such as “My Teaching Partner” have proven to improve race relations and reduce discipline issues of African American male students in the classroom. The program also assists teachers with incorporating good problem-solving skills and techniques into their instruction for a higher level of student engagement that builds positive relationships. As previously stated, the student/teacher relationship is important to the overall academic and social success for African American males in schools.

In many cases, teachers who connect with their African American male students have similar or shared personal experiences that broker a positive relationship with their students (Rezai-Rashti & Martino, 2017). Rezai-Rashti and Martino (2017) said that African American teachers have greater success with African American male students because they are more culturally responsive to students with a similar racial background and they know how to communicate across the culture to engage African American males in learning in the classroom. Conversely, if teachers lack the cultural knowledge to build positive relationships, their African American male students are destined for office referrals (Monroe, 2009; Khalifa et al., 2016). Research indicated that African American male students that feel disconnected in the classroom often rebel during instructional time and act out.

According to Khalifa et al. (2016), African American male students want to be connected with learning; however, they sense when White teachers have low academic

and behavioral expectations for them. This is predicated on the way that teachers view their classroom cultures. Pane et al. (2014) explained that teachers can see their students and classroom culture through one of two ideological lenses, cultural or transformative. Milner (2017) shared a similar sentiment. Teachers that use a dominant ideology such as cultural power develop student/teacher relationships that are based upon unequal dissemination of power in the classrooms. In this case, teachers expect students to sit and learn information without behavioral interruptions (Pane et al., 2014). This approach has led to negative student/teacher relationships. Research explained that African American male students who have many disciplinary experiences must contend with the psychological trauma associated with adverse experiences (Mallett, 2017). Thus, the use of a dominant ideology is detrimental to building a positive student/teacher relationship.

However, teachers who use a transformative ideology, such as a democratic approach to building their student/teacher relationships, have experienced positive outcomes with African American male students. This approach led to positive and vibrant classroom relationships in which students play a central part in establishing the educational culture (Farkas, 2017; Pane et al., 2014). Research indicated that African American male students want to be successful in school and are willing to be accountable for their education. This philosophy aligns with the democratic approach to building a strong positive teacher/student relationship. The student/teacher relationship is crucial to the academic and behavioral success of African American males as well as the retention of teachers. Research indicated that teachers who work in high poverty schools are there each day because of the relationships they have developed with the students and parents.

Kraft et al.'s (2015) study indicated that teachers return to schools that serve students who live in poverty for "the kids" (p. 764).

Strategies for Preventing Suspensions

In this section, I discuss the different strategies for preventing suspensions found in the literature. Each strategy is based on research by experts in this specific field. These strategies are the foundation for my study and serve as ways to address the suspension disparity issue among African American male students. The strategies discussed in this section are as follows: (a) an open-system approach, (b) culturally responsive leadership, (c) high expectations, (d) a customized approach to discipline, (e) focus on the why, (f) school climate, and (g) student/teacher relationships.

Open-System Approach

Kraft et al. (2015) explained that African American males and other students in urban schools could benefit from public schools that institute an "open system" approach in education. In their study, Kraft et al. (2015) interviewed 95 teachers and administrators from six urban high schools that were categorized in their district as "high poverty" schools. From their investigation, they concluded that there were four approaches that a public school could use to benefit students and teachers in an open system: (a) instructional support, (b) order in the classroom, (c) socioemotional support, and (d) parent engagement.

Instructional support. The first approach is the use of coordinated instructional support. This entails the administration team and the school's curriculum coordinator working to align the school's lesson plans with the district's curriculum mandates. Also,

teachers should work within their departments to ensure that the curriculum and common core standards are fully introduced to their instructional team. Williams and Wiggan (2016) explained that students are essential to teachers receiving instructional support. They explained that students must model successful academic behaviors as a form of support for their teachers.

Order. The second approach involves the school district's effort to promote order and discipline in the schools. This approach also requires that the school-based administration team create and implement preventive measures that support the school board policies. According to the researchers, the implementation of order and discipline in a school helps the students focus in the classroom and aids them with stabilizing their personal issues. They further explained that the implementation of classroom order allows teachers to focus on instruction and manage behavior issues effectively. Martinez, McMahon, and Treger (2016) explained that office referrals were higher among African American males in classrooms with little to no order.

Socioemotional support. The third approach is providing socioemotional support for students in urban schools. Doing so would involve drawing upon employees such as the school's counselor and the dean of discipline to aid students in dealing with socioemotional issues that are hindering their learning. Scheurich and Skrla (2003) explained the need for teachers to create a classroom culture that consists of caring for the well-being of each student. "We are talking about loving them—holding them and ourselves to the highest expectations. Every one of them. No exceptions. No matter how

hard it is” (p. 54). Khalifa et al. (2016) also discussed the importance of a classroom culture that is accepting of African American male students.

Parent engagement. An additional approach is to engage parents. Kraft et al. (2015) explained that the greater the level of parent engagement in the students’ education, the stronger the “home-school relationship.” The researchers also advised that strong “home-school” relationships allowed teachers a deeper understanding of how to deal with behavior problems that might arise with the students. Ford and Moore (2013) and Welsh and Little (2018) explained that parental involvement is paramount to closing both the achievement and suspension gap African American males experience in public schools.

Culturally Responsive Leadership/Training/Teaching

Khalifa et al. (2016) explained that African American male students and other students of color in urban schools could benefit from a public school system with culturally responsive leadership. Culturally responsive leadership focuses on four areas: critical self-awareness, teacher preparation, school environment, and community advocacy. A culturally responsive school should have a leader with a critical consciousness regarding his/her perceptions, values, and beliefs related to educating urban students. This form of critical awareness allows the administrator to work effectively with students of color. According to Khalifa et al. (2016), it is “the principal’s critical consciousness of culture and race that really serves as a foundation to establish beliefs that undergird his practice” (p. 10).

Another area is teacher preparation that entails providing new teachers with professional development from their respective school district or college (Iselin, 2010; R. E. Lee, 2018). R. E. Lee (2018) further explained in his study that a teacher preparation model should be developed in urban areas that encompass several key persons: a community scholar, school practitioner, and the university faculty member. He explained that this collaboration would bring together community-minded teachers who are committed to teaching in their respective communities. R. E. Lee further explained that this partnership would work to close the gap between content-based preparation at universities and teachers' cultural pedagogy training for urban classrooms. Again, the training will equip teachers with the knowledge base to teach children in urban schools.

McLoughlin and Noltemeyer (2010) and Carter et al. (2017) recommended that teachers with high numbers of office referrals should receive professional development training to learn effective classroom management strategies to use when teaching African American males. Carter et al. (2017) further explained that White teachers bring their personal biases and stereotypical thinking about African American males into their classrooms. White teachers with such biases must be trained on how to disconnect from their biases in order to treat African American male students equitably in the classroom.

Along with the training, the principal has to be culturally responsive and recruit teachers who have a background using culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom. Khalifa et al. (2016) explained that the resources used would help the leader know that his/her teachers' instruction is culturally relevant. A third approach is to make certain that the school environment is inclusive. This involves the principal promoting a culturally

responsive school that includes all students, parents and community stakeholders. Moreover, leadership involvement in the students' community can improve an urban school and reduce suspension rates among African American males. The school leader needs to advocate for community-based issues that impact students' academic and behavior performance (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Byrd (2016) discussed how culturally relevant teaching could be used to prevent the suspension disparity among African American male students. He explained how using three primary approaches during instruction can benefit African American male students. The practices are as follows: (a) high expectations, (b) promoting cultural competence, and (c) promoting critical consciousness. Byrd (2016) further explained that culturally relevant teachers use a challenging curriculum that scaffolds students' learning. They must have a personal commitment to see their students achieve while they build on their academic strengths. He further discussed that teachers create a classroom climate that is respectful, inclusive, and understanding of their peers' culture. Byrd (2016) explained that teachers must understand their students' communities and home lives in order to develop cultural competence. In order to achieve such a level of competence, teachers have to encourage students to understand their own cultures and incorporate them into the classroom content. In addition to the students, their family and community experiences must also be incorporated as integral parts of instruction. Byrd (2016) further explained that culturally relevant teachers address social justice and racial inequality issues in the classroom as a means to raise students' critical consciousness. They encourage students to identify problems in their communities and discuss solutions. Teachers also empower

students in the classroom and give them opportunities to engage in decisions relevant to their situations.

High Expectations

Edmonds (1979) and Rojas and Liou (2017) explained in their research that urban schools must have high academic and behavioral expectations for African American male students and other students of color who live in poverty. In his research, Edmonds explained that a high performing school with high expectations for students allows teachers to be task-oriented in their classrooms. This means that they are spending more time working with students on academic issues instead of behavior matters. He further discussed that teachers with high expectations monitor their students' efforts in the classroom. Those teachers can be observed circulating throughout the classroom, asking students questions about the content for clarification purposes. Additionally, teachers with high expectations often find ways to solicit other classroom materials. Edmonds (1979) established that teachers use community resources such as churches, local businesses, and other community organizations to partner with the school in order to increase the likelihood of the students' academic success.

According to Rojas and Liou (2017), teachers reported that they were happiest when they could focus on educating their students and not be distracted with the behavior issues that many urban students experience. Preston and Barnes (2017) explained that the school must have strong leadership to accompany high expectations. This involves having a school leader who creates behavior policies and practices in the school that have a profound impact on the school's level of effectiveness. A strong leader in a school sets

the overall tone of the school and how it will operate daily (Edmonds, 1979; Preston & Barnes, 2017). Rojas and Liou (2017) also explained that school leaders and teachers must work collectively to promote high expectations that benefit the learning of African American male students from low income. These collective expectations contribute to the norms, assumptions, and ideologies associated with race and educational achievement for African American male students (Liou, Marsh, & Antrop-Gonzalez, 2016).

Additionally, Gregory et al. (2011) and Heilbrun, Cornell, and Lovegrove (2015) reported that well-structured classrooms that were instituted by the teacher with an emphasis on high academic and a zero-tolerance policy were key to increased students' academic performances and the reduction of suspensions among African American males in their respective schools. Heilbrun et al. (2015) further explained that research indicates that the zero-tolerance policy has accounted for more suspensions among African American male students, and this policy might need revising to ensure expectations are clear.

Hope et al.'s (2015) participants indicated that teachers must communicate the same expectations to African American males that they communicate to all other students in the classroom. Howard et al. (2016) noted several practical steps that urban schools should use to improve this. These include teachers holding African American males to high academic and behavioral expectations. They noted that "regardless of the persona that African American males project in school, there must be an unwavering commitment to see them as able, human with unlimited potential to produce at high levels" (Howard et al., 2016, p. 3). African American male students want to be educated regardless of the

behavior they show. It is recommended that teachers resist the notion not to educate African American male students when that action seems logical.

Howard et al. (2016) also explained how the student/teacher relationship is another practical step. He explained that teachers must set common ground rules and be willing to go a step beyond the normal practices to establish loyalty between them and their students. While establishing these relationships, teachers must realize that African American male students are human beings that need social, emotional, and intellectual support. Howard et al. (2016) further explained that a non-judgmental approach to working with African American male students would help them and limit teachers from judging African American males based on their mistakes.

Customized Approach

Chenoweth (2009) and Golann (2015) discussed how school districts throughout the United States are educating students in urban and rural areas by implementing systematic approaches customized to the needs of their respective students. Charter schools with large African American populations in the Massachusetts area modified their approach to educating urban students. Leaders at Roxbury Preparatory Charter School analyzed several processes in their school and realized that those processes were counter-productive to their students' academic progress. Based on their findings, they modified the curriculum schedule to consist of seven periods, Monday through Thursday, and DEAR time the last period of each day. DEAR is an acronym that means Drop Everything And Read. DEAR was employed as a strategy for students to increase their reading comprehension skills.

Along with the schedule change, Roxbury Preparatory focused on the students' classroom behavior. Teachers were very strategic and used choreographed steps in their approach to classroom management issues with students. For example, teachers began greeting students at the door daily with a "Do Now" assignment. The assignment was a bell ringer or a review of the previous lesson. According to Chenoweth (2009), school staff explained that "we now have a few successful, replicable wheel designs" (p. 177). With this in mind, we should be able to and educate African American males using a systematic approach and hope to educate them and reduce the suspension rates among them. With a system implemented there should be no excuses for African American male students' lack of academic success and reduced suspension rates.

Golann's (2015) study discussed the positive impact of a no-excuse philosophy for African American male students in school. His research noted that no-excuse schools increased achievement and reduce discipline referrals among low-income African American males and Hispanic students. Golann (2015) further discussed that over the last 10 years public schools that utilize this approach changed their instructional practices to incorporate strategies such as extended instructional time, the use of data-driven instruction, professional development, and highly structured disciplinary systems. This customized approach has become the most influential urban school-reform model over the last decade.

Similarly, Iselin (2010) and R. E. Lee (2018) believed that schools should customize support programs to fit their students' unique academic and behavioral needs in school. This entails creating programs that are customized based on comprehensive

assessments conducted by the school. This further means that schools should take a proactive approach to African American males' behavior in an attempt to reinforce the idea of lowering the suspension rates among them. Educators in those school districts decided to "reinvent the education wheel" to ensure that all students were successful. The reinvention concept is similar to R. E. Lee's (2018) philosophy of partnerships between community, practitioners, and college professors to train teachers on how to customize their teaching in order to have a positive learning impact for African American male students in public schools.

Kulkarni (2017) noted in his 3-year study of a charter school in Philadelphia that administrators and teachers must customize their discipline and instructional approach to working with African American males by using a cultural lens. Such a lens entails understanding the cultural background, such as the family dynamics and the personal struggles African American male students face, such as poverty or a single-parent home. This also means that the educator has to resolve his/her implicit biases towards African American male students in order to treat them fairly in the classroom (Kulkarni, 2017).

Focus on the "Why" and Self-Control

Haight, Kayama, and Gibson (2016) studied, in part, the issue of suspensions among African American males in urban schools. They suggest that urban school administrators who suspend African American males should focus more on why the student is misbehaving and what strategies to employ that would prevent undesired behavior in the future. With that focus in mind, educators should take a proactive role in preventing chronic misbehavior among African American males. Haight et al. (2016) also

explained that the Denver Public School System instituted disciplinary policies that embodied a therapeutic approach to resolving student misconduct in the schools. That approach led to a reduction in the number of suspensions among African American males. The approach also allowed educators to collaborate with families of color as a means to address further disparity issues among African American males. Schools that improve communication with African American males as a means of getting to know them provide insight as to why the students are misbehaving.

Gibson et al. (2014) and Day et al. (2016) concluded that the suspension disparity among African American males is a major issue. Suspensions remove students from school for minor misbehaviors such as noncompliance and disrespect. To address this issue, they recommended several action steps. For example, students can be taught to use self-control to walk away when faced with an intense situation such as an argument or a physical altercation. Day et al. (2016) also explained that school leaders should set the expectation of a positive school climate that focuses on students and teachers exercising self-control during stressful situations. Gibson et al. (2014) also suggested that African American males attend school with one primary goal in mind—to learn and not to socialize.

Howard et al. (2016) recommended that educators commit to utilizing several standards and adult guidelines when teaching and problem solving with African American males that will help with all parties exhibiting more self-control. Howard et al. (2016) explained that this approach compels teachers to have high expectations for students. Additionally, teachers themselves must be dedicated to seeing students be

successful using self-control as a strategy for achieving academic success. They explained that schools should provide teachers with the professional development training needed to handle behaviors students displayed in the classroom. Also, they recommend alternative disciplinary interventions other than in-school and out-of-school suspensions for the students. Two alternatives are smaller class sizes and teacher assistants to help with performing the daily duties.

School Climate

Howard et al. (2016) explained that the student/teacher relationship is important and that there should be an emphasis on the diversity that African American males bring to the school climate. This entails addressing the challenges that exist between school districts and African American males. Thus, school personnel should be conscious of various situations that might occur. Students and educators have to work together and overcome the racism, discrimination, and oppressive mentality that exists in our schools in order to ensure a diverse environment (Hope et al., 2015). If not, African American males will continue to perceive school climates as inhospitable to them.

Shirley and Cornell (2011) and Milton-Williams and Bryan (2016) explained in their study that middle school African American males began to observe and form an opinion regarding the school climate. They further noted that established school climates contributed to 8% of the suspensions among African American males. However, an adverse school climate supports the disparity in disciplinary actions that African American males experience. Students from low- and high-income residences reported that they experienced a strict and punitive school climate in comparison to other students

(Khalifa et al., 2016; Skiba et al., 2002). Furthermore, when White teachers do not understand the personalities of African American males, teachers tend to create a school climate based on racial stereotypes that lead to higher rates of school punishments for African American males (Khalifa et al., 2016; Skiba et al., 2011). The racial mismatch of personalities tends to suggest to students that the school climate is unfair, and disciplinary actions are not applied to White students in the same way. When this is evident, the school climate is toxic for African American males (Mattison & Aber, 2007).

To address the school climate issue, Shirley and Cornell (2011) stated, “A positive school climate generates norms, values and expectations that make a student feel safe, emotionally secure and motivated to learn” (p. 117). Schools must embrace the fact that African American males must be educated holistically. A holistic approach involves educating them socially, emotionally, physiologically, and intellectually. Howard et al. (2016) explained that urban schools should work in collaboration with community partners. The use of social organizations such as fraternities, sororities, and churches can be beneficial in increasing African American males’ academic achievement while reducing the suspension rates among them. Moreover, the collaborations will bring positive role models to African American males who do not have such examples in their home lives (Howard et al., 2016). It is incumbent upon teachers and other educators to look beyond the students’ shortcomings and focus on the potential of each student.

Student/Teacher Relationships

Howard et al. (2016) studied the plight of African American males in urban schools. They postulated that teachers must have a genuine “student-teacher” relationship

with the African American males. This consists of having ground rules established for classroom behaviors and a true sense of caring for the overall well-being of the students. Gibson et al. (2014) and Blitz, Yull, and Clauhs (2020) explained that educators should build positive relationships with their African American males to reduce the number of behavior problems during the school year. They also suggested that educators serve as adult guides to assist students through problematic situations when they arise.

Jeloudar, Selangor, and Yunus (2011) explained that teachers with high social intelligence have positive outcomes in terms of establishing student/teacher relationships with African American males. Jeloudar et al.'s (2011) research indicated that teachers with high social intelligence, "organized classrooms by establishing supportive and encouraging relationships with their students, developing the lessons which are based on students' strong points and abilities" (p. 150). A key component that ensures a strong student/teacher relationship is common ground rules. Howard et al. (2016) explained that teachers who establish ground rules, know their subject (mastery), and are willing to go beyond work duties have particularly effective relationships with African American male students.

Gregory et al.'s (2010) and Noltemeyer and Ward's (2015) research targeted the effects that suspensions and relationships have on students' academic achievement. Their research noted that the high suspension rates among African American males had a direct correlation to their student/teacher relationship and low academic achievement among them. This is due to the relationship struggles that African American males face because of poor academic performance. Gregory et al. (2010) and Morris and Perry (2016) noted

that teachers are judging African American males' behavior using a subjective lens that is based on racial stereotypes and misperceptions. Most often, the stereotypes are based on the teachers' ingrained belief system that depicts African American males in an unfavorable and prejudiced way. Such a lens causes teachers to have an adverse relationship with the African American male student.

Conclusion

From the existing research, we know that many African American males that attend high schools throughout the United States are the victims of unfair suspension practices at the hands of teachers and school-based administrators. There are many contributing factors to this. Some of them were previously discussed, such as the students' socioeconomic status, race, and behavior practices (Khalifa et al., 2016; Matthews, Kizzie, Rowley, & Cortina, 2010). Poverty and the enforcement of outdated school board policies are also contributing to the suspension rates of African American males (Weir, 2016; Carter et al., 2017). Additionally, we know that other variables contribute to the suspension rate among the targeted population. For example, Noltemeyer and Ward (2015) explained that African American males are racially different from their teachers, and this causes higher suspension rates among them. The researchers also explained that students who were mismatched in the classroom received less education, and the mismatch had a detrimental effect on the students in the future. We further know that many White teachers experienced a cultural disconnect with African American male students in the classroom. As a result, the teachers are not equipped with the culturally responsive pedagogy necessary to draw upon when teaching

African American males (Khalifa et al., 2016). Last, we know that the role of the father in the life of the African American male is very important to the students' academic and behavioral success in school. Researchers such as Fantuzzo, LeBoeuf, Rouse, and Chen (2012) inferred that an African American male child missing the presence of their father in their education and life has a devastating impact on the student's behavior.

My research on the high rates of suspension of African American males has provided me with a solid knowledge base upon which to reflect. The research supports the fact that there are disciplinary problems within our public schools, and due to those problems, so many African American males are suffering unjustly. According to Welsh and Little (2018), the problem centers on teachers' perceptions of African American males. Additionally, Khalifa et al. (2016) explained that the lack of culturally diverse classrooms is a contributing factor to the suspension disparity among African American males. Regardless of the problems—perceptions or otherwise—throughout the country there is an obvious issue with the suspension epidemic involving African American males (Carter et al., 2017).

The issue of disproportionate suspension among African American males compared to males of other racial groups has been in existence for more than 50 years. There has been a great deal of research time, energy, and financial resources used to study this issue. Even though researchers have made tremendous efforts to understand the situation faced by African American males in high schools, their efforts have not translated into significant changes in schools. We still do not know enough about best practices surrounding the reduction in disciplinary referrals. Research indicates that

African American males are acting out in the classroom because they do not feel included in the learning taking place (Khalifa et al., 2016).

I hope that my research project will result in suggestions that school districts will consider as a viable approach to address the disproportionately high discipline rates among African American male students as compared to other students in high schools. More to this point, I hope that my research will equip teachers and administrators with intervention strategies to use as an alternative to disciplinary referrals for African American males facing behavior issues. Last, I hope that my research will serve as an active voice for change that provokes the implementation of new school board policies in this area. I describe my research methodology in the next chapter.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of my basic qualitative research study was to explore students' and administrators' perspectives on the causes of the high suspension rates of African American males in two high schools. I also wanted to learn ways that administrators tried to prevent such suspensions. During my research study, I interviewed students so that they could discuss their experiences with school discipline and the effect those experiences had on shaping their relationships with teachers and administrators. Specifically, I was interested in discussing with students the strategies they and educators in their school used to combat poor behavior choices by students. I interviewed students to discuss how they felt the classroom environments (cultures) contributed to lower or higher disciplinary referrals/suspensions among them. I also interviewed one administrator (assistant principal) at each school to get their thoughts about strategies they used to address discipline with African American males. My ultimate goal or purpose for conducting this research was to share the strategies I learned from the participants with teachers and administrators in the hopes of reducing the number of discipline referrals among African American males.

Research Questions

My research questions for this study are:

1. What are the disciplinary experiences of African American male students who are on track to graduate as seniors?
 - a. What positive support systems did they have in school?
 - b. What disciplinary obstacles did they face and had to overcome in school?
2. What are the strategies administrators used to address/reduce the suspensions among African American males?
 - a. What are African American males' opinions of their administrators' approaches to addressing discipline problems in their schools?

Methodology

I used a basic qualitative research design in this study. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), a basic qualitative research design allows researchers to learn more about a specific phenomenon. "Basic research is motivated by intellectual interest in a phenomenon and has as its goal the extension of knowledge" (p. 3). Interviewing students afforded me, the researcher, an opportunity to learn firsthand from them. I also interviewed an administrator from each school site to understand how African American males were disciplined. The purpose of the interviews was to understand the individual's personal experiences (Creswell, 2012). Basic research is unique from other traditional designs. For instance, experimental design is used to test an idea to determine the effects of an independent variable on a dependent one. Unlike an experimental design, basic

research does not look to study the cause and effect between an independent and dependent variable. It is about learning and not controlling the outcome.

A basic research design is also different from a correlational design study. In a correlational design study, the researcher focuses on the relationship between the two variables (independent and dependent) based on statistical analysis. There is also a focus on predictability and tendencies among the variables. Additionally, basic qualitative research differs from survey research. Survey research is a quantitative design used to survey a sample population of people to describe their attitudes, opinions, or behaviors. Much like a qualitative research design, survey research focuses on learning about the population being studied. Similarly, grounded theory and basic research are qualitative approaches, yet grounded research is based on a theoretical approach to explaining a process—an action or interaction among a topic. Ethnographic research is also a qualitative design; however, it has a focus on the culture of the group of people based on their beliefs and behaviors. Basic research is different from a narrative research design because a researcher using a narrative design has a focus on telling a story based on the data collected.

Research Setting

My research study took place in two “urban emergent” high schools located in a Western North Carolina school district. Milner (2012) defined urban emergent as an area that is smaller in size than a big city such as Chicago or Philadelphia, but that shares many of the same characteristics of the big city. The student demographics of the district in which the two high schools were located are Whites, 40.2%; African American,

28.5%; Hispanics, 24.5%; Asians, 2.5%; and Indian or native Hawaiians/Pacific, less than 1%. Additionally, the school district was the fourth-largest in the state, with approximately 54,000 students and 15 high schools.

Both schools serve a racially diverse population of students. One of the schools, Valley High School (a pseudonym), was comprised of approximately 1,800 students. The enrollment numbers were Whites, 38%; African Americans, 35%; Hispanic, 18%; Multiracial, 5%; and Asians, 4% of the total population in the school. There are approximately 135 teachers on staff with four administrators (one principal and three assistant principals). Forty-one percent of students in the school were eligible for free lunch, and it is nationally recognized for its magnet school program. The graduation rate among students at this is school was approximately 87%. The other school, Town High School (a pseudonym), has a student enrollment of approximately 1,500 students with a demographic breakdown as follows: Whites, 42%; African Americans, 38%; Hispanics, 14%; Multiracial, 5%; and Asians, 2%. There are approximately 100 staff and teachers employed on the campus with four administrators (one principal and three assistant principals). Thirty-eight percent of students in the school were eligible for free lunch, and it has a strong reputation for its athletic programs. The graduation rate among the students at this school was about 92%.

To ensure that the study was fully implemented, I submitted a formal request seeking approval from the school district and the principals to conduct the study at the two schools. Also, I submitted an online application to the UNCG Institutional Review Board (IRB) for my research approval. Once I received approval from all institutions, I

met with the principals to discuss the logistical information for the study, such as the level of involvement from students at their respective schools. To recruit students, I received permission from the principals at each school to post fliers on information boards located in the cafeteria, student service department, and the main office on each campus. The content on the fliers noted the purpose, targeted students, and contact information (telephone number and email address) for those with questions and/or interest in participating in the study. Also, I spoke with principals about potential students for the study. Their referrals and advice were instrumental in the recruitment of several participants. The principals coordinated my first contact with some students by allowing me to meet with the young men in the principal's conference room during the school day to introduce myself and explain the purpose for the study. I also met a few participants as a result of the fliers posted.

Sample Population

The participants consisted of African American males who were seniors, 18 years old, and on target to graduate from their high school. These students were selected because of their maturity, experience in high school, and their evident motivation to graduate high school. During the interviews with my participants, it was apparent that they matured from their freshman to senior year in high school. Kaheim indicated, "I have grown up so much during my 4 years at Town High School." Sammy from Valley High School stated, "If I had not matured in high school, I would be in trouble every day."

I also selected my participants because I thought that they would bring vast experiences to the study. I noticed that some participants had a few discipline matters, while others had multiple incidents. Additionally, I selected the African American males because I thought they would be highly motivated to graduate high school with a knowledge base to share how they succeeded. This criterion allowed me to have access to African American males on high school campuses. According to Creswell (2012), a convenience sample is a group of participants who are accessible and willing to be interviewed.

The seniors discussed their discipline experiences and the impact those experiences had on their relationships with administrators and school. Additionally, my participants provided insight into their thoughts and attitudes about what strategies they used and those of educators that helped them stay out of the office for discipline reasons. I solicited eight student participants (five from one school and three from the other) and one administrator from each site. This allowed me to conduct my research at two school sites without having to locate participants from several school locations within the school district. Additionally, an administrator (assistant principal) from each school site was interviewed. I hoped that the students from each high school would provide me with tangible data that can be used as resources or strategies for teachers and administrators to reduce the discipline rates among African American males in their respective schools.

Data Collection

One-on-one interviews were the primary method I used to collect data as I conducted my basic qualitative research study. I interviewed each student participant

twice over 3 weeks. Lichtman (2013) explained that interviewing is the major technique used to conduct a qualitative study. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that there are three types of interviews: (a) high structured, (b) semi-structured, and (c) unstructured/informal. I conducted semi-structured interviews. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) also explained that regardless of the type of interview structure selected by the researcher, the participants must be asked good questions. This means that the questions are worded in a manner that is clear to the participant. In order to ensure question clarity as I constructed my interview protocols, I followed Patton's (2015) suggestion of including six types of questions: (a) experience and behavior, (b) opinion and values, (c) feeling, (d) knowledge, (e) sensory, and (f) background/demographic questions. As I conducted interviews, I kept in mind that Glesne (2011) explained that it is important to remember that interviews are an opportunity to learn about what you cannot see and to explore alternatives.

I interviewed students participating in the study to gather data that were relevant in three areas: to understand African American male students' perceptions of discipline practices in high school; to understand the impact that discipline referrals have on the relationships between educators and African American males; and to learn about motivating factors that keep African American male students on task to graduate regardless of their past disciplinary experiences (see Appendix A). I also interviewed administrators as a part of the study in order to gather data that is relevant to (a) reducing the high suspension rates among African American males, and (b) strategies used to build positive relationships with them. Interviews were conducted at a mutually agreed upon

location. Interviews took approximately 45 minutes to an hour each. I audiotaped interview sessions and took brief notes using a protocol form (see Appendix B).

As I noted earlier, the interview protocols were semi-structured. Glesne (2011) explained that semi-structured interviews are both formal and informal; the questions are open-ended and the interviewer is free to ask follow-up questions that may not have been originally scripted. I conducted two interviews with each participant in order to collect data to determine consistent patterns and/or themes. Some of the first-round interviews were rapport-building opportunities where I asked questions to help me get to know the participants better and understand their experiences and perceptions (see Appendix A). The second interviews consisted of questions that required students to provide more details into their discipline experiences, if any, with their administrators (see Appendix C). The first-round interviews provided me with preliminary data to analyze with regards to the students' feelings and relationships toward their administrators. The 3-week interval between interviews allowed me to modify my second-round interview questions based on the interviewees' first-round responses. The data provided me with significant insight into the students' high school experiences with discipline and information relative to their intrinsic motivation to graduate from high school. The data also provided insight into strategies that administrators used in an attempt to address the suspension issue.

I created interview questions to gather data from the students and administrators about their experiences (see Appendix E). Patton (2002) explained that there are several types of interview questions to ask; however the use of experience/behavior questions are the easiest ones for interviewees to answer. He further explained that experience/behavior

type questions allow interviewees to feel comfortable with the interviewing process. I asked general questions during the onset of the interviews in order to build rapport with the interviewees and make them comfortable with the interviewing process. For example, I asked the interviewee, “How is your school year coming along?” Another general question asked was, “What is your favorite subject in school?” These questions made the interviewee feel comfortable and answer questions that do not require much deep thought. Also, the questions were open-ended. Creswell (2012) explained that open-ended questions provide the interviewee with options to respond. Once I established rapport during the first interviews and students displayed a level of comfort, I began asking more probing questions during second round interviews.

This line of questioning allowed me, as the researcher, to ask the interviewee to elaborate or further clarify their responses to previous questions. For example, I asked students questions about their feelings toward their teachers when a discipline referral is made to the office. A follow-up question I might have asked was to inquire how the discipline referral impacted the student’s learning in the classroom. The use of probing questions during the one-to-one interviews with students provided me with sound data that was based on the interviewees’ abilities to describe meaning, concepts, and ideas. Creswell (2012) explained that interviews are ideal to use during a study where the participants can share their perceptions, experiences, and ideas.

I audio-recorded interviews using a digital recorder; this format allowed for easy transference to computer software for storage and managing purposes. I transferred interview data to a computer database and a backup system 24 to 48 hours after the

session. I then transcribed interviews in order to code them. Data collected in hard copy form were stored in a locked file cabinet in my office or at my residence. Hatch (2002) explained, “documents should be collected directly or photocopied to ensure accuracy and completeness” (p. 122).

Documents

During my study, I provided students with a prompt sheet after the first round of interviews so that students could begin thinking in detail about how they would answer the second-round interview questions (see Appendix D). I also asked the participants to write down notes for each prompt so that they could refer to them during the second interview. The goal for the prompts was to assist me in generating further dialogue during the second-round interviews. Creswell (2012) explained that documents should be used to answer the qualitative researcher’s questions.

Data Analysis

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that the data analysis process begins during the first interview. After my first round of interviews with the participants, I began analyzing the transcripts looking for data related to my research questions. As I read through the data, I made notations such as my personal reflections and tentative themes in the margins of the transcripts. This review and my notations assisted me with preparing and adjusting my second-round interview questions. After my second round of interviews, I compared the data with the first round in order to further support my hunches and tentative themes created. I then engaged in emergent coding, in which I formally applied codes that surfaced during my initial process of data analysis to all the

data (Creswell, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Once my data was coded, I identified nine themes related to my research study questions (see Appendix G). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that “data analysis involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read-it is the process of making meaning” (p. 202).

Positionality

Lichtman (2013) explained that in order to distinguish one’s subjective lens from his/her objective lens, it is imperative that the researcher fully self-disclose his or her personal biases relative to the study. Self-disclosure allows the researcher to acknowledge his or her personal biases in order to perform research effectively. My personal subjectivity might influence my interpretations of data, so I must acknowledge some of my core personal beliefs. I am a firm believer that all people should be treated equally regardless of the color of their skin, their gender, sexual orientation, or national origin. This is something I learned during my formative years. As an African American male who has experienced social injustices in a public school, I am extremely motivated to help all African American males facing the same issue.

As a researcher, I believe that my personal and professional experiences in this area were an asset in conducting this study. Personally, I can relate to African American males who feel frustrated with the discipline process and often walk away from it with the idea that no one cares about them or their opinions. Additionally, I can empathize with African American males when they explain their feelings of exclusion in the classroom and their perceptions that their teachers’ attitudes toward them are different

than they are towards students of other races. Professionally, I have dealt with issues of social injustice related to African American males in public schools. Some of the frequent issues are disciplinary inequities, unfair treatment in the classroom, biased perceptions from teachers, and low or no academic expectations. I think that my diverse background of experiences with the issue of African American male suspensions will allow me as the researcher to investigate this matter with compassionate concern.

In order to address issues attendant to my positionality, I kept a reflexivity journal (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to ensure that I constantly monitored how my personal ideas and beliefs were affecting my data collection and analysis. In the journal, I noted my perceptions and personal feelings relative to the information students share. Also, I reflected on questions I considered asking participants in order to solicit data that further answered my research questions. I kept journal notes in a file on my computer and maintained a backup file stored on a disk. Journal notes were created before and after each session with the participants. This was to ensure that I captured my thoughts and feelings relative to the study and its outcome.

Ethical Considerations/Trustworthiness

There were several ethical issues I was mindful of during my study. First, it was crucial to consider the issues of having students as participants in the study and how to protect their confidentiality. As previously stated, I solicited students who were at least 18 years old and therefore considered adults. I self-disclosed the goals and reasons for the study in a consent document that they signed. There was also an ethical issue attached to working with students from a specific school. Understanding that no school wanted to be

labeled negatively because of their student/teacher relationships or disciplinary policy practices, I had to maintain a high level of confidentiality to ensure the schools' anonymity. With that in mind, I was ethically obligated to ensure that the principals were aware of the purpose and goals of the study and conveyed to them that I was there to conduct research and not interrupt their daily instructional and discipline practices. Moreover, as I noted above, I sought to ensure trustworthiness by monitoring my personal biases through the use of a reflexivity journal. Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) explained that qualitative researchers build credibility (trustworthiness) in their research by clarifying biases and reflecting upon them. During my reflection, I noted that some students had great student/teacher relationships that were built on mutual respect and care for each other. My assumption at the onset of the study was that most student/teacher relationships were created solely for the purpose of getting students to work in the classroom. I found that the student/teacher relationships were built on authenticity. Furthermore, I used the "member check" process to ensure that I was accurately capturing what participants meant to say. After each interview and transcription of the data collected, I provided each participant with a written summary of the content to ensure that their statements were accurately transcribed with clarity and meaning as articulated during the interview. To ensure the integrity of my study, I employed what Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) defined as an audit trail. An audit trail is a procedure that allowed me to outline decisions throughout the research process and provide rationales for those decisions. The audit trail allowed me to maintain data so that the reader can understand how data were collected and analyzed, and my rationale. According to

Bloomberg and Volpe (2012), an audit trail increases the rigor and trustworthiness of qualitative research. The audit trail consists of comprehensive notes related to the contextual background of the data and the rationale for all methodological decisions. Last, I looked to share my study and its findings from a holistic perspective. That meant that I shared my data with the reader so that he or she has a realistic and holistic view of my work from the students' and the researcher's perspectives.

Data Reporting

I organized and reported my findings as themes that I discovered from my coding of interviews. I used quotes from the interviewees to help provide a narrative voice to the findings. Biklen and Casella (2007) explained that qualitative researchers find thematic reporting most useful because qualitative research is inductive. After reporting my findings as themes in Chapter IV, I used the themes to answer my research questions in Chapter V. To aid in my analysis, I examined my findings by revisiting the conceptual framework I asserted in Chapter I and the existing research I explored in my literature review in Chapter II.

Limitations

One limitation of my basic qualitative research design study was that it consisted of research from two high schools in the same district. That meant that the data represented a small sample from one school district with 54,000 students in an urban emergent area. Also, the high schools I proposed to study were only two out of 15 high schools in the district with no rural school representation. Therefore, my study does not speak to the contributing factors for high suspension rates among African American

males that attended rural high schools, only those in emergent urban districts. It is important to note, then, that one limitation of my study was that its findings are not generalizable.

Another limitation was the sample size with which I worked in the study. My study was conducted with a total of eight participants, five students from one school and three from the other, and an administrator from each school site. This sample size limited the amount of data I gathered and interpreted for themes found within the schools' cultures. As previously stated, each school had an African American male enrollment of at least 28%.

In addition to the previously mentioned limitations, the use of high school students who were in their senior year was another study limitation. That targeted population limited the data to only speak about their suspension experiences/strategies and student/administrator relationships from two area high schools. There was a total of 15 high schools and five additional special high schools in that district. Also, due to this study's focus on high schools, there was no data that spoke to either the elementary or middle school suspension issues among African American male students.

Also, a limitation in my study would be the lack of feedback from the principals of the schools. The principals have the final word on any disciplinary action recommended by their assistant principals. At any time, the principal can modify and make a recommendation to increase or decrease the discipline action recommended. I think having had an opportunity to interview the principals at the school would have yielded interesting data because of their role as the leader. As I pondered my findings, I

speculated how the principals would have answered the questions. I wonder if they realize that African American male students are constantly referred for discipline matters. I also wonder if they have a different philosophy regarding the discipline policy and how to best use it.

Another limitation of my study was the lack of involvement from teachers. I believe that the teachers' perspectives would differ from the students and assistant principals because they interact with the students daily. Teachers are in a daily fight to educate students regardless of the students' special needs and challenges brought to school. In North Carolina, teachers are underpaid and overworked. They are asked to do more in the classroom with fewer resources. I believe such a demand adds pressure to teachers, and it influences how they perceived and respond to daily situations with African American males. I believe more research in this area might prove to be beneficial for teachers and African American males.

A final limitation is the lack of parental involvement. It appeared that a number of my participants received support from parents. I think that data from parents can be a key to understanding how they motivated their son to be academically successful in the classroom and out of trouble. I recall several of my participants discussing how important their parent or parents were in their lives. I believe that active parents in their child's academic life is vital to the success of the child. I further believe that the parent/student relationship is paramount to addressing the suspension disparity issue among African American male students.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The purpose of this basic qualitative research study was to explore the disciplinary experiences of African American male students who are on track to graduate as seniors. To understand the students' perspectives, I conducted research to explore methods and strategies that teachers in local schools and across the state could use to address the ongoing suspension disparity that African American male students face when compared to students from other racial and gender groups. Also, I explored what students have to say about teachers' classroom management strategies and administrators' methods for dealing with African American males who frequent the office for discipline reasons. Furthermore, through my research, I examined the feelings and attitude changes that African American males developed as a result of their disciplinary experiences in school.

I conducted research to answer the following questions:

1. What are the disciplinary experiences of African American male students who are on track to graduate as seniors?
 - a. What positive support systems did they have in school?
 - b. What disciplinary obstacles did they face and had to overcome in school?
2. What are the strategies teachers and administrators used to address/reduce the suspensions among African American males?

- a. What are African American males' opinions of their teachers' and administrators' approaches to addressing discipline problems in their schools?

The participants in my study were African American males who were seniors, 18 years old, and on target to graduate from their high school. They discussed their discipline experiences and the impact those experiences had on their relationships with administrators and school. Additionally, participants provided insight into their thoughts and attitudes about what strategies they used along with those of educators at their school that helped them stay out of the office for discipline reasons. I solicited three student participants and an administrator at Valley High School and five student participants and an administrator at Towns High School. Both schools were in an urban district in the Southeastern United States. This approach allowed me to conduct my research at two school sites without having to locate participants from several school locations within the school district. The participants were accessible for me to conduct my research. Their accessibility serves as a convenience sample (Creswell, 2012) a convenience sample is a group of participants who are accessible and willing to be interviewed.

Descriptions of Participants

The participants in this study consisted of eight African American males and two administrators from high schools in Drew County. Each participant was identified using a pseudonym. They all came from single-parent homes, with most of them living with their mothers. Only one of my participants lives with his father while the others have no daily contact with their fathers. Most of my participants were active in sports, specifically

football, and they aspired to play collegiate football. Last, each participant did experience discipline issues in high school, even during their senior year.

Biographies of Town High School African American Male Students

Johnson is an 18-year-old student at Town High School. He lives with his mother and younger brother. His father is not an active parent in his life. Johnson recalled that he last saw his father 13 years ago. Johnson is an A/B honor roll student who aspires to go to college, graduate, and get a well-paying job as an engineer. Johnson's favorite subject in school is history.

Kaheim is 18 years old and comes from a single-parent middle-class home. His mother has a college degree and works in management for a bank. Kaheim's mother and grandmother are the role models in his life. After his freshman year of high school, they moved from Charlotte, North Carolina, to our district. Kaheim spends a lot of time at school involved in athletics. He aspires to play college football. Kaheim indicated that his grades are "decent," mainly B's. Kaheim's favorite subject in school is English.

Rames is also 18 years old and being raised by his mother. Rames is an outstanding student/athlete who is an A Honor Roll student with several football scholarship offers from several Division I schools. Rames indicated that he was very aggressive in middle school and stayed in the principal's office a lot. Rames does have infrequent contact with his father, primarily by telephone or text messages. Rames also lives in a middle-class neighborhood. His favorite subject in school is history.

Bay is 18 years old and is also being raised by his mother and an aunt who is close to him. Bay's father has been incarcerated for several years, and they infrequently

correspond by mail. Bay considers himself an average student making grades of B's and C's. He talked about going to college but is not sure how he will pay for it. His favorite subject in school is English.

Mitchell is 18 years old and comes from a single-parent home. Mitchell transferred to Town High School after attending a high school on the north side of town in his freshman and sophomore years. Before transferring to Town High School, his grades were very low. Since the transfer, his grades are B's and C's. Mitchell likes math and plans to attend the community college to take general college courses before transferring to North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State College to pursue an engineering degree.

Biographies of Valley High School African American Male Students

Sammy is an 18-year-old student. He lives with his father and two younger brothers. His father and uncle are very active in his life. Sammy is an A/B honor roll student who aspires to go to college, graduate, and play college football. He also aspires to play professional football. Sammy has made the honor roll since the first semester of his junior year. Sammy's favorite subject in school is math. Sammy explained that his father works hard to make ends meet. He believes that his hard work and dedication will pay off after high school graduation.

Kevin is an 18-year-old student who lives with his mother and younger sister. Kevin transferred to Valley after his sophomore years from a school located on the Northside of town. Kevin plans on attending college so that he can set a good example

for his younger sister. He is seeking a football scholarship. He considers himself a B student, and his favorite subject in school is history.

Timmy is also an 18-year-old student who lives with his mother. He contributes any success that he has in life to his mother because she is the “backbone” of the family. Timmy plans to enter the workforce after high school to help his mother with bills. Timmy does not care for school that much, but he thinks that his teachers want him to be successful in life. His grades are low but better than they were in years past. Timmy does have two younger siblings; they are both in middle school. Timmy never mentioned having any contact with his father.

Table 2

Participant Chart

Name	Age	School	Sports	High School Discipline Incidents	Single Parent Household
Johnson	18	Town HS	No	Yes	Yes
Kaheim	18	Town HS	Yes	Yes	Yes
Rames	18	Town HS	Yes	Yes	Yes
Bay	18	Town HS	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mitchell	18	Town HS	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sammy	18	Valley HS	Yes	Yes	Yes
Kevin	18	Valley HS	Yes	Yes	Yes
Timmy	18	Valley HS	No	Yes	Yes

My other participants are administrators. Ms. Eve is a 52-year-old African American female assistant principal at Valley High School who is completing her fifth year as an administrator. Ms. Eve is a nontraditional educator who started her career

working in the private sector. She is a divorced mother of two children. Participant ten (“Ms. Kim”) is a 48-year-old African American female assistant principal at Town High School who is also completing her fifth year as an administrator. Ms. Kim is a traditional educator who started her career as a classroom teacher. She is married and the mother of two children.

During my interviews, I explored the students’ discipline experiences and the strategies that helped them improve their behavior. I also explored the strategies that administrators used to reduce the discipline disparity among African American males in their schools. Each student and administrator provided me with their stories that I hope to share as vital strategies that teachers and administrators can apply to reduce the discipline rates among African American males in schools.

Chapter Overview

This chapter is divided into nine major themes that emerged from my research. In section one, I discuss the support structure at home and in school for my participants. Student participants explained how educators and their peers offered words of encouragement and performed acts of support towards them. In section two, I explain students’ perceptions of school and the staff. My participants described how they felt a part of the school culture. In section three, I discuss the administrators’ role in handling discipline. The students explain that their administrators were generally fair in handling disciplinary issues with African American male students. Next, I talk about my participants’ friends’ experiences with discipline in school. The consensus among my participants was that their African American male friends received harsher punishments

for violating school board policy than White male students. Then, I discuss the perceptions of my participants regarding White males' unequal punishment for violating school board policy. I describe how participants had conflicting responses to this question. In section six, I present my participants' strategies for overcoming barriers in order to graduate on time. They discussed the different obstacles they faced and the strategies they employed to be successful. Afterward, I talk about the participants' motivations to graduate. They explained how people in their circles of influence and their personal dreams of success kept them on track.

In terms of themes related to administrators, I focus on the administrators' use of counseling strategies such as building positive relationships when handling discipline issues among African American males. They explained that relationship building was a positive step for effective discipline. The last theme focuses on the use of a customized approach to discipline African American males. The administrators explained that in order to be effective in handling discipline issues among African American males, administrators should try innovative strategies.

Findings

Theme 1: African American Students from the Study Believe that Educators are Supportive

The results from my findings were conclusive that the African American participants believe teachers are supportive of them in their quest to become better people. My participants discussed how teachers and administrators supported them through their actions and the conversations between them. They explained that their

teachers and administrators supported them with personal or school-related issues. The support allowed students to feel respected and accountable at school.

Johnson, a graduating senior at Town High School, explained that administrators were supportive of his progress in school and his personal life. He stated, “They ask me personal questions about my well-being. The type of questions that someone would ask to be supportive of you.” Johnson discussed how the expectations for seniors on campus were important. He stated that, as seniors on campus, the teachers were “expecting us to have more of a voice on things we can do or say. They treat us with much more respect and support than that of an underclassman.”

Sammy, a graduating senior at Valley High School, had a similar opinion of the teachers and administrators at his high school. He believed that teachers were supportive. “Yes, I think that there are certain teachers who care about me and really have my back. Last year I had a few teachers that supported me like Mr. Thorne, Mrs. Manos and Mrs. Walker.”

From my research, I also discovered that students felt supported during discipline situations and matters related to their academic performance. My participants realized that their teachers and administrators were an integral part of their support team.

Mitchell, who is a senior at Town High School, explained that even though he had some discipline issues, the teachers support him. He remarked, “Teachers would allow me to make up work. They would stay after school and tutor me when I needed the extra help.” Mitchell truly believed that the teachers helped make Town a great place for African American male students. He asserted, “Would I recommend for somebody to come here?”

Yeah, I would!” Mitchell later stated that his strong belief in the school was a direct reflection of the support he received from an administrator on campus. He said:

Oh yeah, my administrators . . . when you are in trouble they get on you like that. There is one administrator, Mr. B. he got me on straight, now I am on the path to graduate. Mr. B. gets on people because he wants to see them succeed in life. That is what he does along with others.

Timmy, a senior at Valley High School, articulated that there was a supportive relationship among his teachers, his administrators, and him during any situation. He explained, “If they didn’t care they wouldn’t worry about you!” He also noted, “Some teachers I have told them some deep stuff about my discipline and they didn’t judge me or nothing . . . I like that!” Timmy continued to express the same sentiments about his administrators. He explained: “When they started the A Team that showed me they care about my academics. Like when they start taking us to colleges to visit . . . because a lot of us can’t afford college . . . it showed they care so we can have an idea of what it takes to get to college.” He also felt that some of his female teachers were a mother figure to him. Timmy indicated that, “the teachers are like second moms because they care for you and they know the best way!”

My research also indicated that other participants shared similar experiences with their teachers and administrators. They felt supported, cared for, and even pushed by high expectations to be successful in the classroom, on the sporting field, and at home. Rames from Town High School explained that “We have great teachers, people who are going to push you to help you achieve a desired dream to be a better person.” Participants further explained that their administrators wanted them to be better people and be prepared for

college. Kaheim, a senior at Town High School said, “Their job is to make us better people from the time we come to high school and leave for college.”

Kevin from Valley High School also discussed how administrators influenced him at school. He stated, “If my grades dropped, they call me to the office and reminded me to pull my grades up. I think they want to see us graduate so that we can get the heck on!” He believed that the teachers were there to prepare him for life after high school. Kevin said, “Well . . . I mean you may think that the teachers are against you, but really they are getting you ready for college.” He indicated that members of the administrative team supported him even when the penalties for their actions dictated stiff punishment. “Sometimes they would look out for you. Like Mr. P. will when he can with serious issues. They cannot do that all the time because they don’t want to get in trouble themselves.”

My research further revealed that the participants thought they had productive and supportive relationships with their educators in any situation. Kaheim, a senior at Town High School, explained, “The relationship is good . . . these people have influenced me a lot and I will remember them forever. They provided just the stuff I needed and how I needed it.” He added, “Any time I have a problem he/they are good contacts!”

Although the level of support the students received from educators was genuine, it was also seen as “business” at both schools. Bay, a senior at Town High School, explained that the “administration team is very business-like in their approach when being supportive.” He communicated that the administrators always told him to do better because he knew better. Bay explained that their expectation was for him to care more in

order to be successful in school and life. He explained, “They know you can do better and expect more from you. They will talk to you because they want you to be successful.”

Kevin, a senior at Valley High School, attested that the teachers and administrators at school are caring and supportive. He explained, “Yes, teachers care about us because they want to see us go to college. They always ask questions about why I am late and stuff. They remind me I have to be on time.” Kevin continued by saying, “Teachers are really hard on me because they want me to go to college. Sometimes I think to myself, why are they so hard on me? I then think because they want me to be the best me.” Even when he was frustrated with teachers, he realized they were on his side. He indicated, “Well . . . I mean you may think that the teachers are against you, but really they are getting you ready for college.” He also felt the same about the administrators on campus. Kevin stated, “If my grades drop, they call me to the office and remind me to pull my grades up. I think they want to see us graduate so that we can get the heck on!”

In summary, my research indicated that African American males at both schools felt supported by their teachers and administrators. The support was unyielding and expressed in every facet of the students’ lives: personal, athletics and/or academics. Their teachers showed the students support by setting high academic and behavioral expectations. The teachers were caring as the administrators were very business-like with their support. Based on my participants’ responses, it was apparent that the premise for the teachers’ support was to ensure that African American males were successful in high school and prepared to succeed in college and/or life. From my research, it appeared that

students from Town High School communicated more positive experiences with their teachers and administrators than those from Valley High School.

Theme 2: In General, Participants Perceive School as a Positive Place; But Some Still Feel Targeted by Educators

My participants discussed how their high school environment was a positive experience for them. They explained that being an African American male at their school was good and that the role came without pressure or stress. They felt a great deal of support from their peers, teachers, and administrators. Many of my participants found self-confidence, and they also had a sense of gratitude toward those who were instrumental in making school a positive place for them. During my discussions with them regarding this topic, they used words like “great,” “positive,” or even “different” to describe their thinking. Mitchell, for example, explained,

It is great . . . Town High School is a good school. It . . . ah . . . is probably one of the best schools in Drew County. I mean it is good, there are no racial slurs here or anything like that. You know it is a very diverse school. We have a lot of Black kids, White kids and Hispanic kids. It is great to be an African American here!

Kevin has a positive viewpoint about African American males in Valley High School. He explained,

It is good. It is a good atmosphere here and all the teachers want to help me get to college. Ah . . . Valley High School . . . sports wise is big on basketball and football. School wise . . . ah they try to teach you how to be an older man or older woman who is ready for the real world so you can become and do what you want to do in life.

Similarly, Timmy has a positive opinion as an African American male student at Valley High School. He stated,

It is a new experience because all types of race of people go here. I get to meet new people and the teachers are like second moms because they care for you and they know the best way. I feel like all the staff are trying to get us ready for the real world and stuff. Like when I was in ROTC they signed us up to take the FSFA and all that so we can be ready for college. They use to call us up here so that recruiters could talk to us and stuff. They care about us so we can achieve after high school.

Some participants explained that due to their bad experiences at their previous high schools, they could appreciate good experiences at their current school. Kaheim from Town High School explained,

Ah, it is a bit different from my first year at [my other school]. It is a different environment without a lot of drama. I have a better coach who taught me about being a part of a family environment and how to be a leader in our community . . . teachers who care and prepare us for the future . . . it feels good!

Conversely, my research also suggested that some African American males at Town High School felt like school is positive, but they were targets for discipline issues in school. This feeling of being targeted was primarily due to their economic status, the level of coursework in school, and the preconceived notion that African American males act out in school. Rames from Town High School explained, “You stand out. Most African Americans are in the lower classes . . . the standard classes. Everybody is looked at differently because some people have their own prejudice. There have been some situations here, but you know you are Black and is expected to act a certain way.”

Although Bay has a positive perception as an African American male at Town High School, he nonetheless believes that African American males who act out will lose the trust of school staff and administration:

I am not going to say that you are a target because I don't like saying that. I really hate saying that you are a target . . . that is a way of making an excuse. I say you are in the school and it is about how you take it upon yourself and carry yourself. If you carry yourself as a young man, respectful and take care of business, you will be seen as a normal person. But if you go in there raising sand and causing a scene, then you will be looked upon as that guy who can't be trusted.

Sammy at Valley High School shared a similar thought about being a target. He explained, "Yeah, someday the teachers are in a bad mood and they look at you like the enemy!"

In summary, overall, my participants felt and thought that their high school was a positive experience because of the support they received from teachers, administrators, and their peers. Some participants thought school was great because of the relationships they had with their athletic coaches. Even though overall my participants felt that school was great, a few at Town High School and one at Valley High School felt they were targets for discipline because they were African American males.

Theme 3: In General, Participants, Especially at Town High School, Believe That Administrators Do a Good Job Handling Discipline Issues, Especially Issues That Related to Them Personally

The participants in my study explained that administrators at both schools were generally fair in their approach to discipline issues that involved African American males. They believed that administrators typically gave them the least possible punishment for misbehaving. Also, they thought that administrators' approaches to

discipline were highly effective and efficient. Johnson, a senior at Town High School, believed that administrators were very authentic in their approach and easy to talk with about issues. He communicated feelings of warmth and admiration for them.

I love the way they handle discipline. I can talk with them. If you are going to principal in a school, you should care about the students without an agenda. I think that Mr. Anderson, Cloud and West will listen to you. I can tell them things . . . private thing with them.

Rames's perspective of how Town administrators handled discipline was similar to Johnson's perspective. He indicated that their use of various programs helped students who got in trouble. Rames further explained that the use of programs accompanied by the administrators' no-nonsense approach helped him get on track to graduate. He stated, "Ah . . . all I really know is that they have programs for students to stay after school, but I have never had to do that. They handle discipline in a great way. They try to be stern with issues and tell you straight up. That helped me a lot!"

Other participants from Town High School explained that their administrators handled discipline issues with a high level of efficiency and high expectations. Bay explained that, "They are going to take care of it. If you go to the office you are going to get some discipline. It might be ISS or OSS based on what you have done." Mitchell explained that one administrator held him to high expectations, and because of that, he was on track to graduate. He stated,

Oh yeah, my administrators . . . when you are in trouble they get on you like that. There is one administrator Mr. Keith, he got on me . . . straight now I am on the path to graduate. Mr. Keith gets on people because he wants to see them succeed in life. That is what he does along with the others.

Conversely, Kaheim, also a senior at Towns HS, discussed having mixed emotions toward the administrators at school. He believed that administrators executed discipline based on whether they liked or disliked African American males. Kaheim explained that, “It depends on the person they are dealing with. If they like you the discipline will be discipline. Some of them are the worst . . . don’t know how they got a job at a school!”

Participants who attended Valley High School expressed more mixed opinions about discipline at their school. Sammy, for example, had somewhat of a negative perception of how school administrators handle discipline. He did, however, have a positive perception of his relationship with the principal.

I mean they don’t do a good job here. I really don’t talk with them because I have learned to get everything on my own. However, I think the principal has been on my side since I have been here. She has always supported me and talked with me.

Timmy, who is also a senior at Valley High, felt administrators at his school did not allow the students to explain their side of the story during discipline conferences. Timmy stated,

I think they should hear us out first before they think we did something wrong. Because you know how it is that they are thinking that you are lying because you have lied before. I think that they should give us a chance and hear us out before they jump to a conclusion and send us to ISS or suspend us.

In summary, the perceptions among many participants, especially at Town, were that administrators did a good job handling discipline issues involving African American males. Most participants agreed that administrators were fair and impartial when handling

discipline issues. Even though the majority felt as such, some African American males, especially at Valley, felt ignored during some discipline conferences with administrators.

Theme 4: Though Participants were Generally Positive about their Own Experiences in School, They Expressed Concerns about their African American Male Friends' Negative Disciplinary Experiences

African American males in my study believed that the school environment, their teachers, and administrators were supportive of them; however, they also thought that their African American friends and White male students had different experiences. Based on participant responses, African American males' friends were punished for the same behavioral issues that White males were not. My participants felt that their African American male friends received harsh punishments for discipline issues. They believe that administrators had an aggressive mindset towards African American males. However, some participants believed that their friends' punishments were appropriate and due to their friends' behavior during school. Johnson, a Towns senior, explained,

It seems that African American males don't get a warning for the first offense, we are assigned right to ISS. They have less patience with us. If you go to Mr. Keith's office you are being written up automatically. He gives no warnings or allow you to talk about the issue in confidence. My friends have been written up for insubordination, being on the cell phone wearing hats, etc.

Rames at Towns also perceived that his African American friends were frequently written up:

Yeah, ah man for being foolish, playing around and fighting as such. I don't know why Black people feel like they have something to prove, but it seems like we always have something to prove. You know we really have to tighten up, but we don't see that with them. Ah . . . a lot of people are in the same boat. We tend to do the same things . . . like skipping class, getting into arguments with teachers

and being hard headed, etc. Some kids are knuckle heads and stay in trouble. Some of my friends see discipline the same way.

Others believed that their friends are written up because of the lack of supervision in the home. Bay from Town High School noted that his friend is being raised by a grandmother who is elderly; therefore, the friend has no discipline at home. His friend stays out all night and attends school infrequently. As a result of the lack of parenting interventions, the friend is always argumentative with authority figures in school. With the lack of family structure at home, many African American males find themselves making poor decisions in school, for example, smoking in the bathrooms, cutting class, or cursing out teachers and/or administrators.

Sammy from Valley High School perceived that his African American male friends have a lot of discipline writeups. He stated, “You can say that [friends have write-up] because it is how they want to act. If they want to act out, then it is on them.” Kevin from Valley expressed similar thoughts about his friends. He explained that, “they would pretty much say the same thing I said . . . nerve racking [regarding discipline]. You will have to look out for the assistant principals because they will run after you to catch up with you.”

In summary, my research indicated that the participants believe their African American male friends received strict disciplinary outcomes from administrators. My participants explained that their African American male friends were suspended constantly for the same incidents that White males committed and received lesser or no

punishment. They further expressed that the lack of parental guidance is essential to some of their friends' rebellious attitudes and bad decision-making in school.

Theme 5: Some Participants Think that their White Male Friends Do Not Receive Discipline for Bad Behavior, but Other Participants Think that They Do

Some participants believed that White males are not disciplined for several reasons. One reason is the psychological approach of teachers. My participants thought that White teachers look at African American males as outcasts in the classroom. Also, African American males believe teachers only see African American males as trouble-makers in school. From my research, I gathered that African American males have a sense of resentment or frustration when discussing this topic. I noticed that African American males want administrators to address this issue. My participants' responses varied somewhat regarding the issue of White males and discipline. Johnson from Towns High School explained, "Ah . . . they don't get discipline referrals . . . rarely they do. They are doing the same things in school. A lot of students have Alternative Learning Center (ALC) for 40 to 90 days . . . they are Black." Sammy and Kevin from Valley High School concurred that their White male friends never receive punishment for smoking, vaping, or even cutting class to leave school. They believe that their administrators should address this issue and give punishment when it is necessary.

Others in my study, however, felt that their White male friends do receive punishment for breaking school board policy. They believe that their White male friends receive the same level of punishment as others. Mitchell, Bay, and Kaheim from Towns High School explained that their White male friends receive punishment all the time. They conveyed that most of their White male friends get caught smoking or using drugs.

Bay explained that his White male friends get caught doing “stupid stuff!” Some participants explained that their White male friends are punished frequently for vaping, using tobacco products, fighting, and leaving campus without permission.

In summary, my research indicated that some African American males believed that White males did not receive adequate punishment for violating school board policy. Contrary to that belief, some of my participants thought differently. They indicated that their White male friends were punished like their African American male friends whenever a policy was violated.

Theme 6: Participants Overcome Obstacles in Order to Graduate

My participants explained and discussed how they overcame barriers in order to graduate from high school. Each participant acknowledged that they had barriers to contend with, such as fighting, being disrespectful, or drinking alcohol on school grounds. Their barriers were directly related to immaturity during their formative years in high school. They also acknowledged that self-reflection and a change of mindset were major variables that lead to them overcoming their barriers.

Johnson from Towns High School explained that he was the class clown in the ninth and 10th grades. He explained during his interview that he was young and could not handle the freedom that came with being in high school and therefore acting out became his coping mechanism. Johnson said, “Mainly during my ninth and 10th-grade years. Adjusting to high school being a goof and being a clown, I was young and didn’t know any better.” To overcome this issue, Johnson explained that he became comfortable with high school and the teachers in it. He felt that the establishment of positive relationships

with his teachers would serve as a positive coping mechanism to address his immaturity. He said, “Having a good relationship with teachers will help you with greater opportunities.”

Kaheim from Towns had to overcome struggles with fighting and controlling his temper. He conveyed that during his middle school years he was very angry and did not know why. Kaheim communicated that he would fight someone simply because they stared at him. He indicated that his success with overcoming his barrier began with self-talk during his middle school years. He stated, “Once my sophomore year, I messed up everything I worked hard for . . . So in middle school I told myself I have to change in order to become the person I want to be.” He continued to explain that he overcomes barriers today by altering his thinking. He said, “You have to have a strong mindset and wake up every morning knowing that you want to be something in your life and no matter who is in your life . . . you have to work towards it. You have to know that you will see brighter days and only you can control your outcome.” Rames from Towns High School also agreed that to change one has to be honest with oneself. He also believed that for one to change, a lot of hard work was required. Rames said, “You have to put your head down and keep moving forward. I had to deal with my ego and stop trying to show off for people.”

Bay and Mitchell from Towns and Sammy from Valley found refuge in the discipline and structure that came from athletics and making money as their way of overcoming barriers. Bay said, “I just think if you are going to be successful in this world you will have to make money. That is the way I look at it. You will have to overcome

those barriers.” Sammy explained that his coach helped him overcome barriers. He stated, “It really started during my 10th-grade year when I spoke to Coach Ted about playing football. He told me I had all the tools to play football. I started then on my grind with the football and the book work.”

Kevin and Timmy from Valley High overcame their barriers thanks to support from family members and friends. Both participants explained that they began getting in trouble during their junior years in high school because of the freedom that came with having a car on campus. They were easily influenced by their wrong friends to leave school early and cut class. Kevin stated, “When I started driving to school my junior year I would get my friends and leave sometimes because Valley is such an open campus and there is a lot of freedom.” The participants explained that they overcame their barriers by listening to positive people such as parents and friends. In many cases, their gut instinct provided them the right guidance. Kevin stated, “Your gut would tell you not to do it but you would do it anyway. I overcame the barriers by listening to my grandfather and my gut. Also, I started thinking twice about everything and if I was still unsure I would call my pops and get his opinion.”

In summary, my participants discussed how they overcame barriers such as immaturity during their ninth- and 10th-grade years of high school in order to get on track to graduate. Their strategies for dealing with barriers ranged from dedication found in their hard work, getting involved in athletics, and taking advice from family members who were in their circles of influence. However, the overall consensus among them was

that each person had to engage in true self-reflection in order to make the needed changes to overcome their barriers.

Theme 7: Participants Used Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivators to Reach their Goal of Graduation

According to my investigation, the participants were motivated either intrinsically or extrinsically by friends, family members, coaches, teachers, or administrators. Several of my participants explained how their mothers or other family members, such as uncles, consistently pushed them to stay focused academically in school. Others explained how coaches and teachers helped them by building a family culture around them at school.

The idea of attending college motivated several of my participants. Their motivations ranged from going to college in order to secure a well-paying job to the hopes of playing collegiate football. Johnson, from Towns High School, and Sammy and Kevin from Valley High School are motivated to attend college, yet for very different reasons. Johnson stated, “I want to get a good job because I want to be financially stable to buy what I want. I like expensive things. Ah . . . yeah my family such as my mother and grandmother are a motivating factor too.” Conversely, Sammy and Kevin are motivated to attend college because family members see them as role models for their younger siblings. Kevin explained that he has two younger sisters, and he wants to set a good example for them. He further explained that the only way for him to do so was to graduate on time and to go to college. Sammy communicated a similar scenario. He is the oldest of three boys and knows if he makes the right choices, his younger brothers will follow his example. He explained, “My brothers look up to me with this college thing. I can’t let them down.”

Kaheim from Towns High School communicated that his motivation to succeed in school was football and the possibilities of playing in the National Football League. He explained that he is willing to work hard in the classroom and on the football field in order to make it to the highest level of football. Kaheim is fully focused on his goal to play professional football. He said, "I just received an offer the other day to play football at a university. My motivation is to finish high school the best that I can and to play football in college with the chances of pro football. That is the only thing in my mind all day and every day."

Rames and Mitchell, from Towns, and Timmy, from Valley, said that their families provide them with their motivation. They explained that family members, such as mothers and grandmothers, were the support systems for them. They all explained how their family members talked with them about attending college as early as middle school. They continued to say that those family members inspired them when they felt down or needed to refocus. Mitchell stated,

Me and my mom have been talking about college with a focus on graduating from college and becoming an architect. I need college pretty much so I had to change my mindset this year. Now last year as a junior, I had to work extremely hard . . . twice as hard to be on the verge of graduating this year.

In summary, my participants used various motivators to reach their goal of graduating. Family members were major supporters for some students, while others relied on their individual dreams of playing collegiate football and being drafted by an NFL team. My research shows that the participants found motivation from different people and things in order to succeed.

Theme 8: Assistant Principals Believe that Counseling Strategies and Positive Relationships Are the Most Effective Ways to Deal with African American Males and their Discipline Issues

My investigation revealed that assistant principals used various strategies to work with African American males and their discipline issues. My administrator participants explained that techniques such as building positive rapport and listening were important when handling discipline matters. Mrs. Eve, Assistant Principal at Town HS, explained that she believes in using the counseling technique of active listening when handling discipline issues with African American males. She further explained that active listening helps her to build a positive relationship with the students. Ms. Eve stated, “I listen to them during conferencing to build positive relationships and be consistent . . . it is a no brainer.”

Ms. Kim, Assistant Principal at Valley High, shares similar positive strategies for handling discipline among African American males. She believes that a genuine approach to knowing her African American male students helps with successful discipline outcomes. She stated,

The main strategy is just building a relationship with students and having an affinity for wanting them to be successful. And often times the strategy I used when they come into my office for discipline . . . ah . . . I give a cool down period if it is a moment that is happening right then, the cool down period is a must.

The administrators mentioned numerous counseling strategies they employ when dealing with African American males and discipline matters. For example, they allow students to vent their frustration in the administrator’s office. They agree that this practice is needed because students who are angry and emotionally upset will not listen while in

that state of mind. So they consider “venting” a highly effective technique. One strategy that Ms. Kim discussed involved the use of sand hourglasses to allow African American males time to vent when sent to the assistant principal’s office. She employed this technique before she discussed the specific issue with the student. While the student is venting, she uses the sand hourglass. According to Ms. Kim, the sand hourglass “gives them 3 to 5 minutes to calm down and when I notice that they are breathing in a relaxed state, I will ask them questions.”

Another counseling approach is getting to know the whole student. That means the administrators ask about the students’ backgrounds, such as where they are from without trying to pass judgment. When doing this, the administrators also use the self-disclosure technique. By sharing small things about themselves, they allow the students to see them as human, too. Another counseling technique they use is accountable talk. Mrs. Kim explained that she allows students to talk about their decision-making process and be accountable for their decisions. A part of this process involves building a partnership with the student and the parents so that all three parties can collaborate on the best outcome for the student. She explained that the partnership has an impact: “The discipline is seen as us working together in a partnership, both families and administrators, to get what the students need to be successful.” Mrs. Eve explained, “I think that it makes a difference. I think after the relationships are built you can work one to one with the students. I have found that this is really important with ninth grade students.”

In summary, the administrators believe that counseling strategies are vital tools that impact the overall discipline issues with African American male students. They believe that positive rapport based on active listening helps build trust among the students and administrators. They also agreed that a psychologically safe environment during disciplinary issues allows the student to express his emotional frustration without incurring additional repercussions for the current situation. Allowing the students to vent affords them a chance to clear their minds so that they can relax and be ready to think logically.

Theme 9: Assistant Principals Believe a Structured, Yet Customized Process Is Needed when Disciplining African American Males

My administrator participants explained that the current school board policy is antiquated and should be revised in order to address African American males' behavior effectively. They also explained that each disciplinary situation with an African American male could be different; therefore, a unique approach is often needed. The approach can range from talking, listening, or using gadgets to communicate effectively with students. Ms. Eve explained,

Absolutely, yes, it is different for each student not just African American males. It is different for each African American male because of their insecurities. I found out that first you have to ask them are they hungry. I found out that a lot of them are that way because of not eating. I have Lego(s) in my office now, because I found out that they have to do something with their hands. They are somewhat different with their communication so we have to figure how. From my experiences I have found these strategies warranted in order to better serve African American males.

Ms. Kim also indicated:

One way that I have changed is that I have a couple of things in my office that I allow students to touch. And so I have found that to be helpful for students to be able to look over, grab something and start messing with it. So I have changed different aspects from that perspective . . . so using that helps with discipline. It calms them down, so yeah, it has changed from year to year.

The participants thought that African American males could avoid discipline issues in high school if they receive proper instruction from educators during the first few months of ninth grade. They explained that African American males should be made aware of how to conduct themselves in high school. Additionally, they think that African American males should learn to get involved in after school activities during their freshman year to ensure a sense of belonging. Ms. Eve explained,

We read scenarios to them; we give them absolutely everything that has happened that was awful from nude pictures to being absent or being tardy, not graduating, to dropping out. But the main thing we do is we tell them to brand themselves. What are all the brands out here and they start calling out Nike, Ralph Lauren. Then we ask what would be your brand and we ask them to name it. We ask them if someone had to name your brand what would it be?

Ms. Kim also explained that to,

get involved in school it doesn't have to be sports. They stay true to themselves and not be influenced by their peers and don't be afraid to be successful. Be you be ok with who you are, focus on your school work and do your best, ask questions. And then get involved because they need to be involved to care about the school community or the institution of learning so that they can build better relationships.

In summary, this theme focused on several customized approaches that administrators can use to handle discipline issues with African American male students. They believed that African American male students are more relaxed and able to communicate during disciplinary situations when they can release their stress using a gadget such as Legos during conferencing. My participants also thought that African American males should be educated about their image and perception during their freshman year. Last, the two administrators indicated that African American males should get involved in school activities during their ninth-grade year as a way of getting to know what type of activities they enjoy.

Summary

In this chapter, I discussed the nine major themes from my interviews with the participants. The first theme discussed centered on the level of support that African American males perceived from their peers, teachers, and administrators. My participants felt supported by educators with any situation that arose in their lives, whether it was personal or academic. The next theme I discussed pertained to how my participants perceived school. The consensus among them was that school was a positive place for them, even though a few participants felt like they were a target because of their race and gender. My third theme centered on the premise that African American males thought that administrators handled discipline well. They all agreed with that point; however, it was noted that some African American males felt ignored by the administrator during conferencing regarding a discipline issue. My next theme documented the negative discipline issues that my participants' friends experienced in school. They all felt that

their African American friends received harsher punishments for violating school board policy than the White male students. That subject was my next theme. The majority of my participants explained that White males did not receive the same punishment for violating school board policy as African American males. Next, I discussed how my participants overcame barriers in order to graduate on time. My participants discussed the different obstacles they faced and the strategies they employed to be successful. My seventh theme discussed focused on my participants' motivation to graduate. They explained how family members and their dreams of success kept them motivated to graduate high school.

Next, I discussed how administrators use counseling strategies and build positive relationships when handling discipline issues among African American males. My administrators explained that active listening skills and a psychologically safe environment were paramount to building positive rapport with African American males when handling a discipline issue. Last, I discussed the belief that administrators use a customized approach to discipline African American males. My administrators explained that the current school board policy is outdated. New policy and strategies are warranted in order to be an effective administrator.

In Chapter V, I provide a discussion of my analysis and recommendations based upon the findings as they relate to the research questions. I also present the implications of these findings for practice and further research.

CHAPTER V

ANALYSIS AND IMPLICATIONS

I embarked upon this study because of my concern for African American males with high school suspension issues. Given this intent, the purpose of my basic qualitative research study was to explore how African American male students who are on track to graduate as seniors have experienced school discipline and suspensions. I conducted research to explore students' experiences with and perspectives regarding tangible methods and strategies that teachers and administrators can use to address the ongoing suspension disparities that African American male students encounter. Moreover, I examined the feelings and attitude changes that African American males developed as a result of their disciplinary experiences in school. Also, I considered two administrators' methods for working with African American males who frequent the office for discipline reasons.

In this chapter, I analyze the findings of my study. Specifically, I answer my research questions with my findings and connect my findings to existing research. I also revisit my conceptual framework and consider how it relates to my findings. I then discuss the implications for practice and recommendations for future research. I conclude by offering a personal reflection on my research.

Analysis

Research Question 1: What are the Disciplinary Experiences of African American Male Students Who Are on Track to Graduate as Seniors?

Originally, I thought that the disciplinary experiences among African American males would be very similar. I believed that African American males would say that their discipline all stemmed from fighting in school; however, what I found was somewhat different. Sammy explained that insubordination and disrespect were his discipline issues whenever he felt disrespected by a teacher. He believed that some teachers' attitudes/perceptions of him varied from day to day depending on their moods. If the teachers were experiencing a bad day, he perceived them as disrespectful towards him, and he retaliated by being insubordinate and disrespectful. The student's issues align with the literature, which stated that perceptions and personal biases of students and educators affect discipline rates among African American males. Amodio and Devine (2006) explained that teachers and administrators are not aware that their personal biases influence their decision making during the discipline of African American males due to implicit or unintentional racial bias.

Several participants discussed how teachers perceived them as uncontrollable in the classroom setting. This was due to the students' constant movement and talking during class. The students were often written up for being disruptive. As past research from Kunesh and Noltemeyer (2015) noted, African American males' very active learning styles, accompanied by their use of loud voices, are often misconstrued by their White teachers as representing insubordinate or disruptive classroom behavior.

Interestingly enough, all participants in the study felt that administrators' professional discretion played a major role in their discipline. Fabelo et al. (2011) noted in their research that the greatest degree of disproportionality in suspensions existed for minor offenses that left disciplinary actions to the discretion of the administrator. From my study, Bay and Kevin discussed how not listening led to their suspensions. They showed up late to class and disrupted the learning environment because they felt disconnected from the classroom. Earlier research has explained that African American males need classroom settings that are structured in a way that increases their engagement and their level of academic involvement (Gregory et al., 2011). Timmy and Rames also conveyed that the lack of positive reinforcement from teachers in the classroom enticed them to get in trouble. Sugai, O'Keeffe, and Fallon (2012) noted in their research that educators must implement a School-Wide Positive Behavior System (SWPBS) in order to increase the academic and social success of African American males in order to reduce the suspension rates among them.

Other typical disciplinary issues for my participants were skipping class and leaving campus without permission. Kevin and Timmy felt their actions were acceptable because the punishment for leaving campus was not punitive. If they came to school and felt like leaving, they did so. In some cases, they would take a friend and hang out at the mall or get food. Day-Vines and Terriquez (2008) explained that school board policies like these were outdated, and a student-led approach to developing discipline policies and procedures is warranted.

My research findings indicated that the discipline experiences among the graduating seniors varied. Even though the participants' experiences varied, the causes for the disproportionate suspension rates among African American males aligned with past research findings when talking about the causes and preventive measures. My participants' behaviors highlighted how they needed mentors and counselors in their lives. Von Frank's (2010) research explained that schools do not have adequate strategies in place, such as one-to-one coaching strategies, to address the behavior issues African American males display in the classroom. Furthermore, Galassi and Akos (2007) explained that African American males need an opportunity to be personally accountable for their social and academic progress in school.

Research Question 1a: What positive support systems did they have in school? Several participants discussed how their teachers, administrators, and coaches provided positive support for them at school. Sammy explained that his teachers' support helped him become an honor roll student his junior and senior years in school. Kevin indicated that his football coach was his main supporter at school. Because of that support, Kevin became an honor roll student and received a scholarship to play college football. This is similar to findings in past research such as Howard et al. (2016) that explained the importance of a strong student/teacher relationship as the key to African American males' success in school.

All of my participants in the study attribute some of their success to having positive support at school. In some cases, their support came from any educator in the building: teacher, coach, or administrator. Mitchell explained that his teachers were a

positive support for him with his academics. He explained how his teachers would make special arrangements to tutor him, especially when he struggled academically. Kevin communicated that his teachers were supportive because they were preparing him for college. Timmy also acknowledged the strong support at school. He indicated that the Student Services Department was very supportive of him because they made sure he attended the Career Fairs on campus and spoke with College Recruiters and Service Recruiters on campus. Kaheim explained that he established positive relationships with several of his teachers. His grades improved, and school became a joy. Sammy expressed a similar thought because of his relationships with the principal and football coach. He explained that they helped him develop his purpose in life.

The stories from my participants mirror existing research literature. According to Gibson et al. (2014), educators should build positive relationships with their African American males to reduce the number of behavior problems during the school year. Pane et al. (2014) described how teachers use a transformative ideology, such as a democratic approach to building their student/teacher relationships. Such approaches that were applied to my participants led to positive classroom relationships that were important when establishing the educational culture among African American males. My participants also noted the positive impact and influence of their peers and parents for them relative to school. Ford and Moore's (2013) research explained that parental involvement was paramount to closing the achievement and suspension gaps African American males experience in public schools. In summary, my investigation mirrored

past research findings, which indicated that African American males received positive support from educators, parents, and their peers.

Research Question 1b: What disciplinary obstacles did they face and had to overcome in school? Watkins and Aber (2009) explained that African American males' socioeconomic status, race, and behavior practices present obstacles they face in school. This was evident in my study with several participants who acknowledged that their behavior in the classroom was an obstacle. The two administrators whom I interviewed also believed that the school board policy was outdated. Much like the research findings by Skiba et al. (2011) and Vincent, Tobin, Hawken, and Frank (2012), then, the enforcement of the outdated school board policy is contributing to the suspension rates of African American males at both study sites.

Several participants felt that race was a contributing factor to their interactions with their teachers, thus making discipline inevitable. McGrady and Reynolds (2013) explained that African-American males who are racially mismatched with their teachers contribute to the suspension issue. Sammy and Bay from my study explained that the school culture is not inviting because their teachers see African American males as the problem. They articulated a strong cultural disconnect with their White teachers in the classroom. Similarly, Henfield and Washington (2012) explained that teachers who are not equipped with a culturally responsive pedagogy to draw upon when teaching African American males would experience, face, and create discipline issues.

My research indicated that African American males thought that they were targeted for discipline matters, and in some cases, received a harsher punishment for the

same offenses White males committed. They also thought that White males did not receive punishments for violating school board policies. Participants from both schools discussed this matter. Johnson at Town High School discussed how White males would receive a day or two of In-School Suspension (ISS) for fighting, while African American males would receive one or two days of Out-of-School Suspension (OSS). He further explained that the parents of the White males would often come to the school and meet with the principal the day of the incident, and African American parents would not. Johnson felt like the parent meetings impacted the Principal's enforcement of the policy. Kevin from Valley High School shared a similar point of discussion. He discussed how White males would leave campus during lunchtime, and then return to school without receiving consequences for their actions. Kevin further explained that African American males who left campus for lunch would return and be placed in ISS for the remainder of the day. Kevin did indicate that White males appeared more discreet about leaving campus for food because they never brought it back to campus. On the other hand, African American males would bring back their Bojangles or Chick-fil-A bags to let everybody know they left campus.

Research Question 2: What are the Strategies Administrators Used to Address/Reduce the Suspensions among African American Males?

Edmonds (1979) indicated that teachers/administrators must have high academic and behavioral expectations for African American male students. My research findings supported this statement. Several participants noted that their behavior changed greatly when their administrators set high expectations for them. My administrators conveyed the same message. They reported that communicating high expectations allowed African

American males an opportunity to raise their level of consciousness and embrace a new way of thinking about school. Also, administrators used customized discipline strategies that they personalized for each student, which helped reduce suspensions among African American males. They explained that the use of counseling techniques allowed their students to communicate their frustrations regarding the situation. Ms. Eve, assistant principal at Valley High School, explained how she would give the students the first five minutes of their conference to talk, yell, or cry before she began discussing the reason for the meeting. Such communication approaches allowed the students to free their thoughts so they could then listen to their administrator. These techniques were considered to be highly effective when conferencing with African American males during discipline incidents. According to past research such as Chenoweth (2009), school districts throughout the United States are educating students in urban and rural areas by implementing systematic approaches customized to the needs of their respective students.

Research Question 2a: What are African American males' opinions of their administrators' approach to addressing discipline problems in their schools? The majority of my participants believed that administrators handled discipline fairly. They explained that their administrators listened to them and talked through the issues. My participants further noted that their administrators focused on the root cause of their discipline problems. This strategy aligned with research. Haight et al. (2016) studied, in part, the issue of suspensions among African American males in urban schools. They suggest that urban school administrators who suspend African American males should focus more on why the student is misbehaving and what strategies to employ that would

prevent undesired behavior in the future. Conversely, some participants from my study believed that administrators could do a better job of focusing on the overall school climate. They explained that administrators made them feel like it was “us against them” when the administrators were addressing discipline issues at school.

Several student participants believe that race relations could be better in their schools if administrators emphasized this issue. This point of emphasis speaks to past research that school personnel should be conscious of various situations that might occur because of a post-racial society. Students and educators have to work together and overcome the racism, discrimination, and oppressive mentality that exist in our schools in order to ensure a diverse environment (Hope et al., 2015).

Revisiting My Conceptual Framework

In Chapter I, I explained that my conceptual framework included five best practices that educators should consider when addressing the high suspension rates among African American male students. These best practices are as follows: (a) establishing high expectations, (b) a customized approach to student learning, (c) effective professional development for teachers in the area of classroom management, (d) effective student/teacher relationships, and (e) culturally relevant curriculum/leadership/climate. From my research, I found that three of the five best practices were frequently used to assist educators in the two study high schools in addressing the discipline issue among African American male students.

High Expectations

Students from both high schools mentioned establishing high expectations for African American male students. My participants mentioned that teachers, coaches, and administrators set high expectations for them to achieve in the classroom, on the sporting field, and with acceptable behavior. They discussed how important it was for them to maintain good grades because their teachers stressed that to them. Gregory et al. (2011) noted in their research that teachers should have strong academic and behavior expectations for students of color. They believed that the use of high expectations in the classroom would increase the students' academic performance and reduce the number of suspensions among the targeted group. Edmonds's (1979) study also emphasized the importance of high behavior expectations in the classroom and the positive impact it has on increased academic performance by African American male students. Some participants explained how their coaches would push them to be leaders in the classroom and on the football field. They also mentioned that expectations were high at home and always reinforced by a parent or close relative.

Effective Student/Teacher Relationships

My student and assistant principal participants explained how relationship building was at the center of the African American male students' success in school. Several students discussed how their relationships with teachers helped them stay on track in the classroom. According to Howard et al. (2016), teachers must show African American males that they care about them as a person and not just as another student. Teachers that exhibit a level of care for African American male students experience

fewer discipline issues during instructional time and a higher level of academic engagement among the students (Gibson et al., 2014). Some participants explained that their student/teacher relationships felt like a child/parent relationship. They felt so close to their teachers that they could share personal issues with them to get advice and resolutions. According to research, this type of relationship is ideal. Ideally, the relationship between the African American male and the teacher should be as fluid as the teacher's relationship with White students. This will only come to fruition when the classroom environment is based on cultural variables that support all students. Noguera (2008) explained that teachers are responsible for creating a classroom climate that is inviting and relationships with African American males that are positive. However, the teacher must take into account the classroom structure and the students' culture when creating the classroom environment.

Culturally Relevant Leadership/Climate

Making students feel a part of the school and the classroom culture was also noted by some participants. Participants explained that the perception of belonging made them feel comfortable enough to trust some teachers. Several participants explained that their school was a great place to attend. They did not feel that racism was an issue at their school and that teachers did not judge them by their race. I believe that the students felt a sense of belonging in school because of strong leadership. Based on my research, I think that the administrators at the schools embraced diversity and made it a daily priority among teachers and staff at the school. Khalifa et al. (2016) discussed how the principal is responsible for establishing a school climate centered on diversity. They further noted

that it is up to the principal to embrace this approach and be an advocate for it daily. When African American males feel that they are fully accepted by their teachers in the classroom, the level of engagement during instructional time increases. Their engagement in learning reflects their teachers' abilities to institute culturally relevant practices in the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 2009). A teacher using culturally relevant practices should also use materials that are culturally responsive, such as materials that are imperative in reducing suspension issues among African American male students (Saifer et al., 2011). Culturally relevant leadership and environments in schools are important in order for African American males to reach their academic goals. However, the goal of using culturally relevant strategies by teachers is to ensure the sustainability of cultural practices that support the changing identities of our African American males in our public education system.

In summary, my research findings support several of the best practices noted in past research. In my opinion, this shows that some practices work; however, the need for more effective practices are still warranted. From my research, I think that an emphasis must be placed on two best practices that I did not experience during my study: (a) customize learning for African American male students, and (b) effective professional development for teachers in the area of classroom management. These areas are critical to reducing the suspension disparity among African American males in both high schools.

Implications

School board members, superintendents, school-based administrators, and teachers should refer to my research as a guide to help develop, implement policies, and

strategies to reduce the suspension rates among African American male students. The results from my study address the suspension issue from students' and assistant principals' perspectives, which are often overlooked. Participants in my study provided a narrative of what are best practices to utilize to reduce discipline issues among African American males in high school. Following the findings from my qualitative study might assist policymakers with understanding and eliminating a portion of the challenges they face with the suspension matter.

My research confirms what the literature says; that is, in order to reduce the suspension disparity among African American males in high schools, several factors must be addressed. First, the root causes of the problem must be investigated. My research aligned with the literature in that major causes for the suspension disparity center on the following: (a) perceptions, (b) classroom structure, (c) antiquated behavior management strategies, and (d) student/teacher relationships. My research also reinforced previous literature prevention strategies that consist of the following: (a) high expectations, (b) customized discipline, and (c) culturally responsive environment. In other words, my participants confirmed that the suspension disparity among them could be reduced if specific measures are instituted in high schools. The participants also suggested that there is a need for teachers to be trained in the area of understanding people from other cultures. If allowed to implement policies and create strategies, based on my research findings, my recommendations for school districts' key stakeholders are outlined in the following sections.

School Board Members (Customized Approach)

School Board members should approve the use of a customized approach to addressing discipline issues with African American males. This would involve school districts revisiting their current discipline policy to make the needed revisions that address the discipline concerns for today's African American male students. Our school board policies and district were established in 1963 as a result of the merger between Winston-Salem and Forsyth County School Systems. During my 13-year tenure in this district, I have noticed that the disciplinary policy has undergone minimal change to address the social and emotional needs of African American male students. The current policy is written to address the disciplinary action of the student, taking into account their past incidents that are categorized as mitigating or aggravating factors. The policy, as written, allows the assistant principal to review the student's history as a partial determination for the level of punishment issued for the current school board policy violation. Historical records suggested that there is a conflict between school board policy prescriptions for discipline referrals and how educators (administrators) enforce the policy prescriptions (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2012; Office of Civil Rights, 2010). The conflict helps lead to an imbalance in the suspension rates among students from different backgrounds. My participants explained that out-of-school suspension did not deter them from misbehaving in school. They explained that out-of-school suspension caused them to fall behind academically and contributed to their self-doubt, which caused feelings of inferiority in the classroom. With that said, a new discipline policy with an emphasis on student retention should be introduced. This means

utilizing alternative discipline by involving partnerships with the school counselors, social workers, and the school psychologist to help African American males with decompression techniques to resolve conflicts and communication effectively during stressful situations with their teachers, peers, and parents. This would involve African American males working one-on-one or in a group setting with school counselors, social workers, and the psychologist on campus. Students who are working with an agency representative would be assigned an alternative learning placement in order to work through their behavior issues while remaining in school for academic support.

My research findings indicated that assistant principals have implemented a customized approach to working with each student because they found it to be more effective than the traditional school board policy as written. Ms. Eve, assistant principal at Valley High School, explained that school board policy is antiquated and that suspending African American males is not helping them; in fact, it hurts them more. Ms. Kim, assistant principal at Town High School, shared a similar viewpoint. She explained that school board policy should change because our African American males are different each year. Ms. Kim continued to say that the change is due to the lack of parenting that some African American males are receiving. Her experiences have been that parents are becoming younger, and they show no willingness to be a parent. With the aforementioned discussed, I think that School Board Members should strongly consider an approach to discipline that allows for customization of the current discipline policy as written. Carter et al. (2017) explained that African American male students were the victims of antiquated school policies that do not address their classroom behavioral needs.

DeMatthews (2016) explained that schools do not have adequate strategies in place, such as one-to-one coaching, to address the behavior issues African American males display in the classroom.

Superintendents

As the leaders of their school districts, superintendents must make reducing the suspension rates among African American males a daily priority. This starts with the superintendent having a goal for his/her school district to be culturally responsive. In order to achieve this goal, there must be a mandate from the superintendent to his/her executive cabinet team members with a documented plan of action that is Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Timely (SMART). Ensuring the implementation of a SMART plan allows the superintendent and his/her executive cabinet team members to be strategic in their approach. The SMART approach allows for tangible results. Once the SMART plan is established, the executive team members (instructional superintendents) will work with principals and communicate what is recommended so that classroom teachers create a culture that African American students are a part of each day. Additionally, the superintendent should make it a point of emphasis during school board meetings and other press opportunities to market his/her commitment to ensuring a culturally responsive school district. The superintendent should schedule town hall meetings throughout his/her district to discuss the plan and answer questions from the public regarding it. Khalifa et al. (2016) explained that African American male students and other students of color in urban schools could benefit from a public school system with culturally responsive leadership. Culturally responsive leadership focuses on four

areas: critical self-awareness, teacher preparation, school environment, and community advocacy. A culturally responsive school should have a leader with a critical consciousness regarding his/her perceptions, values, and beliefs related to educating urban students. This form of critical awareness allows the administrator to work effectively with students of color. Bay, a student from Town High School, explained how he did not feel his culture was important on the school campus or in the classroom. He explained, "I think school is set up for other students and what makes me feel comfortable in school really don't matter." Sammy from Valley High School felt the same. He stated, "They don't care about how I learn best in school. I hate sitting for hours at a time, I like to move or do things in the classroom." As a part of a superintendent's mandate, the implementation of a culturally responsive school environment would ensure that teachers are using instructional techniques to get students up and moving in the classroom.

School-based Administrators

Haight et al. (2016) studied, in part, the issue of suspensions among African American males in urban schools. They suggested that urban school administrators who suspend African American males should focus more on why the student is misbehaving and what strategies to employ that would prevent undesired behavior in the future. With that focus in mind, educators should take a proactive role in preventing recurrent misbehavior among African American males. Additional to being proactive, administrators should create a school culture that is inclusive of African American males. Principals should also emphasize the importance of building and maintaining positive

student relationships. Mitchell, a student at Town High School, attributed a lot of his academic success to the positive relationships he had with his teachers. He explained, “My teachers were always there for me. If I was having a bad day academically, they would give me chances to get things right. They would also talk to me to find out what was wrong and help me get back on track.” The principal has to make positive relationship building a top priority in his/her school. This means daily communications and professional development training for teachers who are struggling in this area. He should also assign mentors to struggling teachers. Moreover, the principal should solicit feedback from students and parents on the subject. This is paramount because relationships are based on perceptions. If the parents and students perceive that the student/teacher relationships are positive, this will help reduce the recurrent of discipline issues.

Teachers

Gregory et al. (2011) reported that well-structured classrooms that were instituted by the teachers with an emphasis on high academic and behavior standards were key to increasing students’ academic performances and the reduction of suspensions among African American males in their respective schools. In the Hope et al. (2015) study, the participants indicated that teachers must communicate the same expectations to African American males that they communicate to all other students in the classroom. From my research, one student spoke in detail about the lack of classroom structure. Kevin, a student at Valley High School, stated, “Some of my teachers let me do whatever in the classroom. It seems like they really don’t care!” He went on to say that he could come to

class late or get up at any time to go out without receiving any repercussions for his actions.

As an administrator, students must understand expectations relative to their academics and classroom behavior. Daily, I impress upon teachers the need to set high expectations for students in the classroom. I believe that students need structure, as the research indicates. As I reflect on my tenure as an educator, I am made aware that teachers who set high expectations experienced few behavior issues with students in the classroom. I have noticed that students that act out in some classes conformed and performed well in other classes. This was due to teachers maintaining high levels of expectations, while others did not. Again, those teachers who set low to no expectations for their students' behavior experienced daily discipline issues. As an administrator, I share with teachers my thoughts on them becoming a master teacher. It stems around the fact that teachers must learn their craft and become a life-long learner. This means that teachers should develop a teaching style that helps them control behaviors and impact learning in the classroom. This also means that teachers should seek a mentor to help them with developing such a style. Additional to a mentor, teachers who need help should also seek professional development training. The training will provide them with ideas and effective, research-based approaches.

In closing, my recommendations center on a few key actions. They involve teachers and administrators working diligently on creating a school culture that includes African American males. Second, educators must emphasize the importance of building and maintaining positive student/teacher relationships. Next, there must be an emphasis

on setting high expectations for students' academics and behaviors in the classroom. Last, to ensure that teachers and administrators are well trained in these areas, professional development would be offered for staff in the areas of (a) building positive perceptions, (b) creating a classroom culture of inclusion, and (c) building positive student/teacher relationships while setting high expectations.

Recommendations for Future Research

My research consisted of a basic qualitative research design study that focused on a few students in two high schools in the same district. This means that the data is a small sample from one school district with 54,000 students in an urban emergent area. Also, the high schools' data is a representation of two out of 15 high schools in the district that has no rural school representation. Therefore, my study does not speak to the contributing factors for high suspension rates among African American males that attend rural high schools, only those in emergent urban districts. My recommendation would be to conduct studies on this subject with larger high school sample sizes in urban and rural areas. This would ensure that the data collected would be a true representation of the African American males' perspectives in those school districts.

Another recommendation would be to increase the student sample size. My study consisted of a total of 10 participants—three students from one school, five from the other, and an administrator from each school site. This sample size limited the amount of data I gathered and interpreted for themes found within the schools' cultures. With that said, I would recommend that the sample size for students would be between 20 and 30

students and two or three administrators from each school. The larger sample sizes would provide the researcher with more data to collect, interpret, and report.

Also, I would recommend that the researcher broaden the scope of the participants. My study consisted of only seniors who were on track to graduate. This targeted population limited the data to only that group of students, their suspension experiences, and relationships at one of two high schools. I would recommend expanding the targeted population to include students in elementary, middle, and high school (9-12). Or perhaps only high school students in grades 9-12. An expanded target area will allow the research to ascertain information and interpret data based on a larger body of students' experiences at each grade level.

Additionally, I would recommend soliciting teachers and parents to participate in the study. I think that teachers have a different perspective relative to African American males and the suspension issue. Teachers are working with students on a day-to-day basis, and in some cases, get to know their students. By interviewing teachers during a study, they might share information that students fail to share. Parents may also have insight into some intangibles that can help researchers with tangibles strategies and solutions to address the issue of suspensions among African American males.

Lessons Learned: Personal Reflections from the Study

My overall reflection of the study is that it was a worthwhile experience. Because of the experience, I learned a lot about research and how it works. Additionally, I learned about students and their assistant principals' thoughts about the education system and discipline among African American males. The first lesson I learned centered around

getting participants for the study. This step involved working with the school district's research department representative for research approval. Then collaborating and communicating with principals at the targeted high schools to get permission to conduct the study on campus and advertise for it. I found the principals amenable to the study because they perceived it as an opportunity to better their schools and find tangible solutions to serve African American males in their schools better. My first inclination was that the principals would be skeptical about the research; however, the reality was very different.

The next lesson I learned involved the participants. Some of my participants were a little hesitant regarding becoming involved in the study. It was interesting to experience this because these students were some of the first to volunteer for the study. However, as time went on and I built a positive rapport with them, they became very open with their communication and freely shared their experiences, feelings, and thoughts. One of my participants remained a little guarded with his responses. I came to realize that he felt that way because of negative experiences with school administrators and teachers. For me to build that trust, I had to work a little harder with him. This was evident during our pre-interview conversations. I constantly talked with him about other things to ensure his comfort level. I found that talking with him about sports and family allowed him to put his guard down during interviewing sessions.

The assistant principals were easy to talk to in the study. I think that stemmed from my professional relationships with them as a colleague. Also, I believe that they were genuinely interested in building positive relationships with African American males

in their schools and wanted to help them. I recall them discussing their goal to see African American males perform well in the classroom by having the necessary coping skills to handle conflicts. The assistant principals spoke passionately about this subject, in part because they have young African American sons. Their passion was heartfelt, along with their level of commitment.

Another lesson I learned involved the interview questions. At first, I wanted to ask the questions as they were noted on paper. I quickly learned that some responses require follow-up questions. For example, when I asked the participants about what they like about school, most responded with playing sports or certain teachers. Such a response prompted me to ask why that sport or teacher. I found that asking the follow-up question provided me an opportunity to know more about the participants. Moreover, I found that active listening and silence after asking a question was powerful. During that moment of silence, my participants used that minute to truly reflect on the questions and responses in a thought-provoking manner. Counselors are trained to use silence to empower their clients. I felt that was the outcome with my participants. After learning how to use silence when conducting my interviews with the participants, I am convinced of its power.

Also, the environments/locations for the interviews were ideal. I interviewed students in locations that were comfortable for them. For some, their comfort zone was in the school in the conference room of the main office. Others were comfortable with a friend or family member close by. My goal as an interviewer was to be present and not distract from the points of emphasis being made by the participants.

As I reflect on this study from a knowledge standpoint, I was ignorant of the processes and protocols of a study. At first, I was a little apprehensive because I had never conducted a study of this magnitude. I can honestly say that several classes I took were instrumental in providing me a knowledge base to assist me with feeling comfortable with the process. As I embarked further upon the study, I felt confident in my abilities to conduct the study because of several key factors: (a) the participants in the study, (b) the support from my advisor, and (c) my passion for the subject matter.

The participants made the study fun and intriguing to me. I believe that was the case because they wanted to be involved in the study in order to share their thoughts and feelings. When I interviewed the participants, they were very candid and willing to share information. They showed excitement and laughed when the conversations afforded them those opportunities. Conversely, they provided deep and genuine introspective responses at other times. During my interviews with interviewees, I experienced mixed feelings that ranged from sadness to excitement. I felt sad when listening to them talk about their poor student/teacher relationships or how their teachers perceived them as “the enemy” during instruction time. At other times, I was filled with excitement when my participants talked about their positive relationships with educators and how those relationships were the cornerstone for their academic and behavioral success. I felt the same level of excitement when I interviewed the assistant principals. My excitement stemmed from their exhibited passion and unyielding commitment to helping African American males succeed in the school. The assistant principals believe that African American males can succeed in school if educators set high expectations for them. My participants allowed themselves to

become an important piece of the study. I believe that their role in the story was directly related to their genuine interest and passion for the subject matter.

A further reflection of my study brought to mind certain words such as patience and organization. Embarking upon this journey helped me to understand how critical one's patience is in this process. To conduct this research study was a reminder that patience was the key. Along with patience, I had to stay focused on the goal, which was to address the suspension disparity among African American males in high schools.

In closing, I think my study provided an intimate look into the minds of my participants. They shared their thoughts and feelings about the suspension process, their relationships with administrators/teachers, and solutions to address high suspensions among African American males, all of which spoke to the purpose for my study—to ascertain strategies that educators and school board personnel could use to reduce discipline among the targeted population. I believe that I was successful in accomplishing that. Additionally, some of my findings align with past research on this subject. Specifically, in two areas: (a) building positive relationships between students/educators, and (b) setting high expectations for African American males to be successful in the classroom.

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APPENDIX A
FIRST ROUND INTERVIEW GUIDE

Goal: To interview African American males who are seniors who had or might not have had disciplinary experiences during their 4 years in high school.

Rapport building questions:

How are you today?

How is school coming along?

Are you excited about graduating high school?

What are your plans after high school?

What college do you want to attend?

- a. Have you applied and been accepted?

(If applicable) What branch of the army do you want to join?

- b. Have you filed the required paperwork?

What type of work do you want to do?

- c. How much money do you want to make?

Grand Tour Questions

1. What is it like to be a student in this school district?
2. What is your favorite subject in school?
3. Tell me about _____ high school?
4. What is it like to be an African American male student at _____ high school?

Concrete Questions

5. Have you ever been called to the Principal's office for discipline reason? If so, for what?
6. How many times would you say you have been written up?
7. Do you find that a lot of your African American male friends are frequently written up for disciplinary reasons?
 - a. Have they shared the reasons?

Comparison Questions

8. How did your discipline referrals change during your 4 years in high school?
9. How did your discipline referrals compare to the discipline referrals of your White friends?
10. How did your discipline referrals compare to the discipline referrals of your African American male friends?
11. What are your thoughts about your behavior in classroom this year in comparison to your behavior in the classroom last year?

New Elements/Topic

12. We've talked about your discipline referrals. Are there other aspects of your school experiences that you want to discuss?
13. Let's look at another area we haven't covered. What are your thoughts about your administrators' ways of handling discipline issues?

Elaboration Questions

14. You told me about your behavior in the classroom. What else can you tell me about you?
15. What else can you say about your administrators' ways of handling discipline issues?

Closing Questions

16. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experiences with discipline in school?
17. Can you think of anything else you want to say about being a student at _____ high school?

APPENDIX B
STUDENTS' INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FORM

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Position of Interviewee:

The purpose of the interview is to discuss your disciplinary experiences during your high school years. During this interview I will collect data such as your perceptions of the discipline policies and the strategies you used when teachers made discipline referrals to administrators. In addition to that I will collect data that notes your intrinsic motivation to achieve in school. All data that is collected will be kept confidential and securely locked away in my office. The interviews will last approximately 45 minutes to an hour. In order to conduct the interview a consent must be signed.

[Get consent form signed]

Questions: Refer to the interview guide

(Thank the individual for their cooperation and participation in this interview. Assure them of the confidentiality of the responses and the potential for future interviews.)

APPENDIX C
SECOND ROUND INTERVIEW GUIDE

Goal: To interview African American males who are seniors that had or might not have had disciplinary experiences during their 4 years in high school.

Rapport building questions:

How are things going since we last spoke?

Any changes with you and school?

What are your thoughts about graduating high school?

Grand Tour Questions

18. What is it like to be a graduating senior with a few months remaining in your WS/FC School career?

19. Tell me about your last month at _____ high school?

Concrete Questions

20. (If applicable) When you are called to the Principal's office for discipline reasons, how does it make you feel?

21. Do you think your teachers care about you?

22. Do you think your administrators care about you?

23. How would you describe your discipline experiences as an African American male student at _____ high school?

24. How would your African American friends describe their discipline experiences as a student at _____ high school?

Comparison Questions

25. How would you describe your relationship with your teachers and administrators this year in comparison with your teacher/administrator relationships this year?
26. How would you describe your mindset about discipline issues this year in comparison to your mind set last year about discipline issues?
27. What is motivating you this year to graduate in comparison to what motivated you last year to become a senior on schedule to graduate?

New Elements/Topic

28. We've talked about your relationships with your teachers and administrators. Do you think that your relationships with teachers were based on your judgement?
29. Let's look at another area we haven't covered. What are your thoughts about overcoming barriers? What disciplinary barriers did you have to overcome?

Elaboration Questions

30. You told me about your barriers in the classroom. What else can you tell me about them?
31. What else can you say about your teachers and administrators' relationships with you?

Closing Questions

32. Is there anything else you would like to add about your feelings towards your teachers and administrators?
33. Can you think of anything else you want to say about your disciplinary experiences at _____ high school?
34. Is there anything you would like to say about your journal entries?

APPENDIX D
STUDENTS' PROMPTS

During our second-round interviews we will discuss the following:

1. What were the discipline issue(s) you experienced in school?
2. What caused you to act out?
3. How did the administrator resolve the issue?
4. How did you feel during the issue?
5. How did you feel after the issue was over?
6. Did you see the issue(s) as something major?
7. How did the discipline issue motivate you to graduate high school on time?
8. How did the discipline issues impact your relationships with
parent/teacher/and administrator?

Please consider writing down notes to each question so that we can discuss these fully during the next interview.

APPENDIX E
ADMINISTRATORS' INTERVIEW GUIDE

Goal: To interview the dean of students who discipline African American high school students.

Rapport building questions:

1. How are you today?
2. How is work progressing this year?
3. How long have you worked for this district?
4. How long have you worked as an AP?

Grand Tour Questions

5. What is it like to be an AP at this school?
6. Tell me about _____ high school?
7. What do you like best about _____ high school?

Concrete Questions

8. How often do you discipline African American males per week?
9. For what types of behavior issues?
10. Do you find the offense to be major or minor issues?
11. What are your thoughts regarding current school board with regard to its use with African American male students?
12. What if any changes would you change regarding the policy?
13. What strategies did you find to be most effective when dealing with African American males and discipline issues?

14. What strategies did you find to be less effective when dealing with African American males and discipline issues?
15. How does your administrator/student relationship impact discipline outcomes with African American males?

Comparison Questions

16. Has your approach to disciplining African American males changed from year to year?
17. How did your disciplinary outcomes for African American males compared to the discipline outcomes of White students?
18. What are your thoughts about school board policy this year in comparison to years past?

New Elements/Topic

19. Are there other aspects of your interactions with African American males you want to discuss?
20. What are your thoughts about how teachers handle discipline issues with African American males?

Elaboration Questions

21. What else can you say about your teachers' handling of discipline issues?

Closing Questions

22. Is there anything else you would like to add about your role in handling discipline referrals?

23. Can you think of anything else you want to say about being an assistant principal
at _____ high school?

APPENDIX F
ADMINISTRATORS' INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FORM

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Position of Interviewee:

The purpose of the interview is to discuss your experiences executing school board policy with African American males. During this interview I will collect data such as your perceptions of school board discipline policies and the level of effectiveness when it is applied to discipline issues involving African American male students. All data that is collected will be kept confidential and securely locked away in my office. The interviews will last approximately 45 minutes to an hour. In order to conduct the interview a consent must be signed.

[Get consent form signed]

Questions: Refer to the interview guide

(Thank the individual for their cooperation and participation in this interview. Assure them of the confidentiality of the responses and the potential for future interviews.)

APPENDIX G
CODES AND THEMES

Perceptions	Relationships	Motivation	Support	Obstacles
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*These major codes derived as a result of the frequency pattern found among the students' interview responses.

Themes

Participants	Administrators
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participants believe that educators are supportive in their quest to become better people. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assistant Principals believe that counseling strategies and a positive relationship are the most effective ways to deal with African American males and their discipline issues.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In general, the African American male participants perceive school as a positive place for them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assistant Principals believe a structured yet customized process is needed when disciplining African American males.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In general, participants believe that administrators do a good job handling discipline issues. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Though participants were positive about their own experiences in school, they expressed concerns about their African American male friends' negative disciplinary experiences. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most participants think that their White male friends do not receive discipline for bad behavior. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participants overcome obstacles in order to graduate. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participants used intrinsic and extrinsic motivators to reach their goal of graduation. 	

*Each theme was developed as a subset to the codes created.