

**WHEN BLACK MEN SUCCEED: A QUALITATIVE STUDY
EXAMINING BLACK MEN'S K-12 EXPERIENCES AND THE IMPACT
ON THEIR LIFE SUCCESS**

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ABSTRACT

Black boys in America face a myriad of challenges not only in society but within the very schools that are supposed to provide safety and support. They are often mislabeled, disproportionately disciplined, and funneled into less rigorous courses, but somehow still find a way to overcome these systemic barriers. This qualitative study highlights the educational struggles faced by Black men during their K-12 experience, while identifying the factors that contributed to their academic success. This study specifically examines the experiences of 19 successful Black men from the Northeastern United States who have gone on to lead productive lives, while highlighting the critical factors that shaped their academic trajectories. Through 30- 60-minute semi-structured interviews, the study investigates the impact of mentorship, teacher expectations, parental involvement, school climate, and culturally relevant education in shaping their path to success. The study's findings reveal that high expectations from educators, strong family support, and access to mentors who are Black served as vital factors in promoting resilience and academic engagement among Black males. Black men in this study expressed a need for reform in curriculum and disciplinary practices, as well as a desire for more Black educators, to provide better support for all students, particularly Black males. This study adds to the discussion surrounding Black male achievement by shifting the focus from negative stereotypes and perspectives to actual strategies to foster the academic and overall life success of future Black boys.

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my immediate and extended family, who offered words of encouragement and support at every point throughout this program and the writing process. In addition to my wife, Kourtney, my two children, Charlotte and Luke, were a constant reminder to keep pushing during this journey. I also dedicate this work to other Black boys and men. When you feel like you are not good enough or you “cannot,” remember, you can. I am a living example.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	iii
DEDICATION.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	v
LIST OF TABLES.....	x
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
What is the issue?.....	1
Academic Lag of Black Males.....	2
Long-Standing Disparities.....	3
Impact of Societal Stereotypes.....	3
Race and Educational Outcomes.....	5
Systemic Challenges.....	6
Lack of Teacher Diversity.....	7
Cultural Competence.....	8
Why Some Black Men Succeed.....	10
Conclusion.....	11
2. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	12
Theoretical and Conceptual Framework: Educational Leadership.....	12
Paradigms of Ethical Educational Leadership.....	13
Paradigm of Justice.....	14

Paradigm of Critique.....	15
Paradigm of Care	15
Paradigm of the Profession	16
Impact of Stereotypes on Academic and Disciplinary Disparities	17
Disparities in Perceptions of Black Boys.....	19
Principals’ Beliefs and Values Shaping School Communities	22
Impact of School Climate on Academic Success	25
Factors Shaping Academic Success and School Climate for Black Boys	27
The Role of Principals in Teacher Commitment and School Success.....	30
The Impact of Teacher-Student Relationships on Academic Success.....	32
Principal Perception of Students.....	34
Research Questions.....	35
3. METHODOLOGY	37
Introduction.....	37
Data Collection Procedures.....	37
Interview Process	37
Sampling	40
Data Analysis	40
4. FINDINGS.....	43
Research Design.....	44
Description of Participants.....	44
Data Analysis	46

RQ#1 What educational factors do Black men now leading productive lives attribute to their success?	46
Parental Involvement and Family Support	46
Mentorship and Role Models.....	49
Teacher Expectations and Support from Educators.....	52
Empathetic Teacher Relationships.....	55
Supportive Community and Peer Influence.....	58
RQ#2 What Would Black Males/Men Who Are Now Leading Productive Lives Like to Tell Educational Leaders About How to Support All Students?	58
Practical Life Skills.....	61
Culturally Relevant Education.....	63
Importance of Black Educators and Mentors.....	65
Teacher Expectations and Supportive Environments	67
Empathetic Educators	69
RQ#3 What do Black Men Who Are Now Leading Productive Lives Think Are the Factors That Are Affecting the Achievement Level of All Students, Especially Black Males?	72
Systemic Barriers	72
Disconnect Between Curriculum and Real-World Preparation	74
Unsupportive Educational Environment.....	77
Social and Cultural Influences on Black Male Achievement	80
Relation to Theoretical Framework	84
5. DISCUSSION.....	88
Limitations	88
Summary of Findings	89

Future Research	91
Recommendations.....	93
Conclusion	97
REFERENCES	99

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Table 4.1 Black Male Participant Demographics.....	45
2. Table 4.2 Excerpts Supporting Multiple Ethical Paradigms.....	86

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The prime objective of public schools is to ensure that every student attains proficiency in the skills outlined in the assumed curriculum. The adopted curriculum, while experienced by all students, varies in terms of teachers' pedagogical practices and students' engagement across classrooms. Despite efforts to align school curricula to state-adopted standards, the outcomes among student groups differ significantly. Student achievement is predictable by race, level of poverty, and disability status. Two of the most widely studied explanations for racial and ethnic gaps in student achievement are racial and ethnic differences in socioeconomic status and variations in school quality. There are several reasons why students from higher SES backgrounds usually outperform students from lower SES backgrounds. Financial resources enable parents to access stimulating learning experiences, environments, and high-quality healthcare, promoting cognitive development in utero and during early childhood (Quinn & Cooc, 2015).

What Is the Issue?

Academic achievement is pivotal in shaping an individual's future opportunities and success. However, in the United States, disparities in educational outcomes persist among different racial and ethnic groups, leading to what is commonly referred to as the "achievement gap." This dissertation examines the various factors contributing to the academic achievement gap, with a particular focus on the challenges faced by Black males.

Academic Lag of Black Males

Academic achievement holds a significant role in shaping individuals' future opportunities in life. An achievement gap exists when one group of students consistently achieves significantly higher educational outcomes on average than others (Hung et al., 2020). Moreover, Black males are more likely to be retained as early as the fourth grade and experience the highest rates of expulsions, as well as stereotype threats (Hackett et al., 2018). In K-12 public schools, Black males trail behind all demographic groups in terms of both race and gender. Black male students encounter more significant obstacles when striving for academic success in the educational system. This positions Black boys at the lowest echelon of America's racial and economic hierarchy (Brown, 2015).

Although reading scores of African American Boys in grades 4 and 8 increased over the past decade, they remain behind those of White, Latino, and Asian males, and a large majority fall short of proficiency at their grade level (Moore & Phelps, 2020).

For half a century, one of the most persistent discussions in the field of education has revolved around strategies to narrow the academic performance disparity between White students and their Black¹ and Hispanic counterparts (Jeynes, 2015). Test results dating back to the 1970s from the National Assessment of Educational Progress revealed a significant achievement gap between Black students and their White counterparts (Dalton & Conley, 2008). Educational inequalities impede progress toward a more equitable society and jeopardize economic and scientific advancements, as a significant

1 I will use the terms Black and African American interchangeably

portion of the American population cannot fully realize their potential due to limited access to high-quality education (Merolla & Jackson, 2019).

Long-Standing Disparities

Despite the significant consideration given to this issue, there remains an ongoing trend where, on average, Black children continue to achieve less favorably compared to White children across conventional educational benchmarks. These disparities have been identified as early as the initial year of life, wherein Black children exhibit lower levels of cognitive development in infancy when compared to White children (Gardner-Neblett et al., 2021). These discrepancies have far-reaching consequences extending beyond K-12 education. Specifically, research links these gaps to college readiness, encompassing variations in attendance rates at prestigious universities, enrollment in quantitative college majors, and postsecondary earnings (Soland, 2021).

Impact of Societal Stereotypes

“Blackness” in America is constructed to be associated with negative stereotypes that lead to injustice and unfair treatment in the criminal justice system and socioeconomically. The inescapable nature of these problems, as it relates to the achievement gap in public education, has reached a point where Blacks are often deemed by scholars as “endangered,” “At risk,” “in crisis,” “Uneducated,” and “left behind,” (Kumah- Abiwu, 2019). Stereotypes have a deep and intricate historical legacy in the United States, exerting substantial influence, particularly on African American males, who are arguably the most prominently stereotyped racial group in the country (Taylor et al., 2019). These stereotypes disadvantage Black male students and stop them from flourishing in the classroom. The stereotypes support the idea that African Americans do

not value education. Stereotype threat focuses on social-psychological predicaments arising from widely known negative stereotypes about a group. The existence of stereotypes suggests that an individual who belongs to a group or exhibits features that conform to it makes the stereotype more credible as a self-characterization in others' viewpoints and possibly one's own (Steele & Aronson, 1995). The lack of culturally relevant experiences with culturally competent teachers, as well as academic disconnection and stereotypes, contributes to their negative self-image and poor academic performance. Black male students are burdened by derogatory labels such as "criminal," "aggressive," "anti-school," and "hardcore," which seem to envelop them upon entering American schools, disseminating exclusion, oppression, and unjust disciplinary measures. These stereotypes place African American male students at a disadvantage, hindering their academic progress in the classroom (Hawkins-Jones & Reeve, 2020).

Research has demonstrated that stereotype threat has harmful effects on the immediate and enduring academic achievements and psychological well-being of students from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds (Borman et al., 2020). The theory of stereotype threat suggests that African American students may achieve lower scores on standardized tests due to their anxiety or apprehension about validating the stereotype of intellectual inferiority attributed to Black individuals while taking the test (Whaley, 2018). Racial vulnerability is defined by Claude Steele (1995) as the anxiety African Americans feel knowing that one is a potential target of prejudice and stereotypes. Steel argued that after experiencing a lifetime of exposure to negative images of their abilities in society, African American students are likely to internalize an "inferiority anxiety" (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Stereotype threat is frustrating at every level of schooling

because it hinders the advancement of these groups, particularly students who possess the skills and self-confidence to excel in the performance domain. African Americans' susceptibility to the threat derives not from internal doubts but from their identification with the performance domain and the worry they experience about being stereotyped (Steele, 1997).

Race and Educational Outcomes

The term "structural racism" describes a societal framework where race plays a fundamental role in organizing and categorizing individuals, determining their positions of relative advantage or disadvantage based on their racial classification. Studies have demonstrated the pervasive presence of structural racism within virtually every significant social institution in the United States, including but not limited to the criminal justice system, financial markets, healthcare, and the economy (Merolla & Jackson, 2018). To enhance the educational achievements of Black children, a transition from concentrating solely on the Black-White achievement gap to emphasizing the necessity for systemic transformation is needed. We need to recognize that structural racism underlies the educational experiences and outcomes of Black students (Gardner-Neblett et al., 2021). Some argue that the achievement gap could be attributed to the traditional school system's structure and its inability to tailor educational tasks and feedback to ensure that all students achieve mastery (Soland, 2021).

Several critical factors negatively impact the educational journey of African American boys. Many come from environments molded by drugs, crime, and academic failure, which affect how they are viewed in society and school. As a result of their experiences, teachers develop negative perceptions rooted in stereotypes, particularly

those educators who lack cultural competence (Hawkins-Jones & Reeves, 2020). Researchers and policymakers have found that many males of color have lower school achievement, academic and career readiness, and graduation rates than their female counterparts of color (More et al., 2021). Like race, family SES strongly correlates with children's academic performance. There is a strong connection between academic competence and household income. This applies to African American Students as well. Poor and low-income children dramatically lag behind their high-income peers in reading and math achievement (Henry et al., 2020).

Systemic Challenges

Black adolescents disproportionately attend large urban schools where academic achievement and graduation rates are often lower than the national average. Black males are more likely to be held back as early as fourth grade and experience the highest expulsion rates and stereotype threats. Black males are generally believed to have limited opportunities for quality education as they encounter numerous systemic factors that create educational opportunity gaps and limit Black male academic achievement (Ponterotto et al., 2018).

The reality of racial discrimination and trauma is ever present for Black males in urban, suburban, and rural settings, regardless of their socioeconomic status. Oppressive conditions in education, criminal justice, health, and employment, for example, significantly impact their well-being and societal advancement (Moore et al., 2021).

Black males continue to be plagued by underperforming academically when compared to their White male counterparts. The national high school graduation rate for Black males is 59%, compared to an overall graduation rate of 80% for White males

(Grace & Nelson, 2019). Addressing this existing issue is a matter of life or death, as the literature suggests that Black males who do not finish high school face a higher likelihood of incarceration before the age of 30 (Grace & Nelson, 2019). Until significant public outcry from people of influence and power, the advancement of young men and Black boys will likely remain constrained. In the worst ways, the racism, discrimination, and racial oppression they have experienced and continue to endure are central to many struggles.

Lack of Teacher Diversity

In recent decades, the United States has undergone a significant transformation in its demographic composition, marked by a swift and substantial increase in racial and ethnic diversity (Barakat et al., 2019). The U.S. Department of Education reports that approximately 80 percent of teachers in the country identify as White, whereas only 45 percent of the students in these schools are White. African Americans make up 6.1 percent of all teachers in public schools, yet they constitute 15 percent of the total student population (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2022). While research results may differ when it comes to assessing how ethnicity and gender influence the academic achievements of diverse student groups, one consistent observation is that the absence of cultural competence has been a hindrance in addressing the educational, emotional, and social development requirements of such a varied student population (Wallace et al., 2022). Starck et al. (2020) discovered that teachers' racial attitudes tend to reflect those prevalent in society. This alignment can lead to schools becoming biased environments where biased leaders implement policies formulated by biased policymakers (Murphy et al., 2018). Bol and Berry (2005) noted that teachers consistently held lower academic

expectations for African American students in mathematics, starting in elementary school and persisting through high school.

Teachers in schools play a crucial role in influencing the academic success of Black males. Literature reveals a presence of racism when examining the connection between the educational performance of Black males and their White classroom teachers. Research on this topic is firmly entrenched in American society, and racism adversely impacts the quality of interactions between teachers and students. The divide between White teachers and Black students is further exacerbated by pervasive societal influences that nurture and propagate negative perceptions of Black students (Douglas & Lewis, 2008). Research focused on Black students and the impact of teacher expectations reveals a heightened apprehension. Studies indicate that teachers frequently judge Black students based on their racial background rather than their academic achievements. Additionally, teachers typically hold less optimistic expectations for Black students, and these diminished expectations tend to encompass Black families as well (Malone et al., 2023).

Cultural Competence

It might be easier for educators to accept the failing of Black boys educationally if the site of their problem were their homes, their parents, and siblings, or the streets with the police and law enforcement. Still, school is one of the primary places where Black boys' problems appear (Billings, 2011). Traditional, one-size-fits-all curricula are not proximately pedagogically effective for financially insecure students of color, as they are for middle-class White and Asian students. A culturally relevant curriculum that is culturally content, intelligible, and meaningful for students of color from low

socioeconomic backgrounds improves their educational outcomes, sense of self-efficacy, and self-determination, as well as their future life chances (Borck, 2019).

Although the goal of racial and ethnic diversity has been admirable, meaningful work starts with a diverse population. Diversity and inclusion are the goals of cultural proficiency, and unless every aspect of diversity is addressed, no stakeholders in the community are served proficiently (Lindsey, 2014). Culturally proficient leaders help their colleagues understand and accept that, despite years of exemplary work, additional skills and perspectives are necessary to provide effective teaching (Lindsey, 2014). Cultural competence is the recognition of the significance of sociopolitical, economic, and historical experiences of different racial, ethnic, and gender subgroups as legitimate influences on how people learn and achieve, both within and outside formal and informal education settings (Johnson & Hooper, 2022). Cultural competence encompasses the knowledge, behaviors, and dispositions necessary to interact effectively with diverse cultural groups. Positive experiences with teachers have a positive impact on students at risk of marginalization and oppression (Grace & Nelson, 2019).

Cultural competence enables educators to develop culturally relevant pedagogy. Culturally relevant pedagogy empowers students to examine critical educational content and inquire about their role in creating a genuinely democratic and multicultural society by using students' culture to help them produce meaning and understand the world (Milner, 2010). Systemic racism and racial injustice are not the only contributing factors to the problems Black males face. Other factors, such as community-driven issues, inadequate parental supervision, and insufficient funding for urban schools, also contribute to these difficulties (Kumah-Abiwu, 2019). Educators who foster an

environment of culturally relevant learning view their students' culture as an asset, rather than a hindrance to their success (Milner, 2010).

Why Some Black Men Succeed

Despite the systemic challenges they face, Black male youth demonstrate remarkable resilience, maintain lofty educational goals, and exhibit a strong commitment to their education despite adverse schooling conditions (Brooms, 2021). The academic success of Black males is significantly shaped by the interplay of their school and family environments, community, educational perspectives, and interactions with teachers and peers (Ponterotto, 2018). Recognizing their pivotal role in shaping a child's development, schools must prioritize understanding the actions that foster student trust and confidence.

This is crucial for students who have historically faced marginalization within the American public educational system, such as Black males (Rhoden, 2017). A 2019 study conducted by Irvine aimed to explore and identify the elements that contribute to the academic achievement of 10 African American participants at a Historically Black College or University. The study found that several factors contribute to the success of African American males. All participants in the study highly valued academic success. Family support was paramount in their academic achievements, often as motivators, instructors, mentors, and confidants during challenging times. Some participants were inspired by positive examples, such as family members who returned to school as adults or peers who overcame academic obstacles.

In contrast, the motivation for some participants to pursue education was negatively influenced by observing unfavorable outcomes among those who did not prioritize education. Religious and spiritual faith have been shown to be a cherished

mechanism for coping with life's challenges. Teachers, mentors, and peers provided encouragement and positive influences, pushing participants to set high academic goals and strive for success. A strong work ethic, often instilled by family members or mentors, helped participants overcome barriers, even in the face of societal pressures.

Conclusion

The academic achievement gap for Black males remains a critical and ongoing concern, with implications for their life trajectories. Addressing this issue requires a holistic approach that encompasses changes in the educational system, increased teacher diversity, and a shift in societal perceptions and stereotypes. Recognizing the factors that contribute to the academic success of some Black male students is essential for informing strategies to support those who may be struggling. By fostering trust and understanding in educational institutions, providing appropriate role models, and offering necessary support, we can work toward narrowing the achievement gap and ensuring a more equitable educational experience for all students, regardless of their race or background. This study focuses on the factors from the K-12 experiences of Black men and their contributions to life success, with a specific emphasis on the unique challenges impacting Black males. It should also be noted that while Black men face several inequities, some do find success, and more needs to be considered.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter's discussion is divided into two mutually supportive sections. The first component focuses on the project's theoretical and conceptual framework. The second component focuses on what is known about the topic. The chapter concludes with the research questions that have emerged from considering the findings on the topic.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework: Educational Leadership

In education, practical educational leadership involves guiding and motivating individuals within educational environments to attain objectives, which inherently requires taking concrete measures (Connolly et al., 2019). The efforts of policymakers over the last two decades have focused on raising achievement standards for all students through various school reforms, with an increased emphasis on accountability, performance, evaluation, and assessment. However, what remains unchanged is a clear consensus in the policy and research arenas that “effective school autonomy depends on effective leaders” (Day et al., 2016).

Educational leadership is a complex and multifaceted field that poses numerous challenges for leaders. One of the most impactful ways for leaders to face the complexities that arise in education is through transformative leadership. Not only are Transformative leaders reflective learners, but they are also developers of people and fosterers of collaboration. A leader is an agent who engages in transformative practices that lead to change in social relationships (Oord, 2013). Evidence suggests that transformational and organizational development, when led by school leaders, is most effective, resulting in students feeling empowered and motivated, displaying a general

concern and commitment to growth in the whole person, whether student or staff, making it attainable (Sebastian, 2017). Leaders must prioritize ethics and morals at the forefront of their leadership, placing the needs of students above all else. Leaders must make just decisions and protect students while they are under the care of their teachers without exposing them to personal biases, prejudices, and harm (Sebastian, 2017). For educational leaders, genuine liberty and prosperity can be found in a life centered on fundamental ethics. Leaders who prioritize students' needs indirectly contribute to student learning by influencing their parents (Sebastian, 2017).

Excellent educational leadership is functional as it involves the effort to achieve the best. It is a fact that excellent schools, where excellent education is provided, can be created with excellent leaders. Excellent leaders strive to build the present safely and best by remembering the past and imagining the future. School administrators should strive to learn how to create excellent schools and maintain this effort continuously (Day et al., 2016).

Paradigms of Ethical Educational Leadership

While it is the responsibility of school leadership to foster an environment characterized by safety and inclusivity earnestly, it is equally imperative to consider the divergent perspectives of stakeholders. The efforts to impede a school's obligation to support students who may experience feelings of marginalization are often exhibited because of freedoms within democracy allotted to stakeholders. In exercising their right to express opinions on educational matters, stakeholders sometimes hinder a school's duty to aid students who may feel marginalized. This interference presents itself in various forms, such as regulating curriculum content, reassessing the historical context of

racially discriminatory laws, or advocating for a more balanced perspective. It is paramount for stakeholders to comprehend the profound duty vested in school leaders, encompassing the equitable and just treatment of all students.

Assessing ethical dilemmas through the lens of the four ethical paradigms—Justice, Critique, Care, and Profession—is paramount. Each of these paradigms holds intrinsic value, and it is incumbent upon school leaders to operate within the parameters of all four paradigms. Leaders need to develop a heightened awareness of their personal and professional ethical codes, which shape their conscious and subconscious thoughts when confronted with moral quandaries. By possessing a more profound understanding of themselves, leaders become better equipped to make decisions that serve the best interests of all students, even amidst the backdrop of a rapidly evolving socio-political landscape.

Paradigm of Justice

Schools as organizations should focus on building and fostering caring and empathetic environments within the school community. Suppose school leaders and educators desire to close the achievement gap. In that case, they should strongly consider operating from a paradigm of justice to ensure a fair and just learning community for all students. Leaders should turn to their code of ethics to make fair and just decisions in the face of ethically unjust laws. School leaders should consider bringing faculty, parents, and students into one stream of thought concerning the idea of an equitable, safe, and caring school community, all for the best interest of students, as well as the clarification of the role the school leaders play to ensure that happens (Cagle, 2022).

Paradigm of Critique

With schools becoming more diverse in numerous ways, it is rudimentary that school leaders lean into the ethic of critique. School leaders must proactively address the changing demographic of schools by addressing inconsistencies, challenging the status quo, formulating hard questions, and debating and challenging the issues (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). School leaders must examine their unstated values and morals to determine whether they have been compromised over time. Education has historically marginalized certain groups of students. School leaders employing the ethic of critique are essential. Discourse alone is not enough. School leaders should utilize discourse as a beginning to lead to political action (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). The ethical paradigm of critique is crucial for school leaders to apply, as its primary aim is to awaken educators to the inequities in society, particularly in schools, encouraging them to address challenging questions regarding social class, race, gender, and other areas of difference (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). School leaders must step into the realm of discomfort to address sensitive and long-standing issues in society and education. School leaders should thoughtfully consider the ethics of critique and viable options to reduce occurrences that compromise students' rights to fairness and equity.

Paradigm of Care

Schools' first job is to care for children (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). School leaders are responsible for making daily decisions that impact the future of students and their families. Leaders' decisions and success indicators are traditionally linked to improved academic achievement, often at the expense of students' social and emotional well-being. School leaders need to consider placing the ethic of care at the epicenter of

the educational process by nurturing and encouraging students. This concept contradicts those who prioritize "achievement." School leaders face the daily challenge of balancing the needs of multiple stakeholders. Educational leaders must shift away from a top-down, hierarchical model for making moral and other decisions and instead adopt a leadership style that emphasizes relationships and connections (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). By employing the ethic of care, school leaders can increase the likelihood of making effective decisions that keep the most important stakeholders at the forefront: the students.

Paradigm of the Profession

In the 21st century, as society becomes increasingly demographically diverse, educators will need to develop, foster, and lead tolerant and democratic schools more than ever (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). Leadership, in and of itself, is challenging and is further exacerbated by the freedoms granted to all American citizens, as well as the complexities of race and politics. Schools have been forced to shoulder the responsibility of “fixing” all that is right in the world and acting as an entity that serves and pleases everyone. Due to the social and political climate, school leaders are expected to demonstrate effective leadership by achieving improved academic outcomes and considering the diverse needs of stakeholders. Leaders should collaborate with stakeholders, including faculty, staff, and students, to promote cohesiveness, deemphasize competition, facilitate a sense of belonging, and enhance individuals’ skills as they learn from one another (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). For this reason, school leaders, now more than ever, should consider and examine their professional code of ethics.

School leaders must advocate and cultivate diversity in various ways to adapt and contribute productively in a rapidly changing world. In applying the ethical paradigms of justice, critique, care, and the profession, school district leaders must consider that, despite personal beliefs and feelings, whether religious or political, educators should prioritize what is best for students at the forefront of all decisions.

For school leaders, the ethics of justice, critique, care, and profession are invaluable, and it is essential that they operate within the parameters of all these paradigms. Understanding their ethics and employing the ethical lens of various ethical paradigms is essential for leaders to meet the needs of their students. As a result, leaders are better equipped to make decisions in the best interests of students, even in the face of a constantly evolving world.

Impact of Stereotypes on Academic and Disciplinary Disparities

An individual's beliefs about their capabilities are shaped by sociocultural scripts, culturally based stereotypes, personal identities, and perceptions of others (Bowe et al., 2015). Stereotype threat refers to the sensation of being placed in a situation where an individual's evaluation is influenced by prevailing societal stereotypes associated with their particular group. This phenomenon has been observed to impact the academic performance of minority groups and females (Bowe et al., 2015).

Adolescents are increasingly aware of racialized expectations regarding who can be successful (Wang et al., 2022). Stereotypes operate along a spectrum, meaning that the content of an individual's stereotype endorsement can range from negative stereotypes (e.g., Black students are more academically incompetent relative to their White peers) to positive stereotypes (e.g., Black students are more academically competent in school

relative to their White peers) (Wang et al., 2022). Wang et al.'s 2022 3-year longitudinal study involved 2546 participants aged 11 to 16, with a demographic composition of 50 percent males, 60 percent White, and 40 percent Black, among whom 57 percent qualified for free lunch. The study explored whether the endorsement of racial stereotypes by Black and White American adolescents had distinct associations with cognitive engagement, ability mindset, and math performance, and whether gender moderated these relationships. Outcomes revealed that, after one year, endorsing either negative or positive racial stereotypes, rather than holding unbiased beliefs, was linked to weaker cognitive engagement and stronger fixed mindsets in mathematics.

Black males are more likely to be suspended and expelled than students of other races (Kunesh & Noltemyer, 2019). The differential treatment of Black students is expected to be one cause of disproportionality. In the judicial system, discrimination against Black males is also pervasive. Stereotypes enable people to make quick, yet biased, social judgments about another individual based on observable characteristics, such as age, gender, social class, or race. Kunesh and Noltemeyer's 2019 study examined the issue of unequal disciplinary measures affecting Black male students. The study explored the impact of stereotypes on disciplinary disparity. Pre-service teachers were randomly given a vignette depicting a rebellious student. Those who were presented with a vignette featuring a Black student were more inclined to believe that the student would exhibit future misbehavior, in contrast to those who read about a White student. Results indicated that certain teachers associate the misconduct of Black male students with more lasting factors, which potentially impacted attitudes and actions toward students.

Coping with interpersonal conflicts, Black male students are challenged by stigma and stereotype threats in society and school. Black males are portrayed in society as predators, a “threat to personal safety,” which is not extreme apart from how they are perceived in schools (Hawkins Jones et al., 2021). Black learners are labeled as “bad boys who are underachievers and academic failures bound for prison.” As a result, Black males may question their identity and capabilities (Hawkins-Jones et al., 2021, p. 43). Harris et al.’s 2021 study examines a specific set of influences that disproportionately hinder Black males' college enrollment and success compared to other racial and ethnic groups. These factors prevent Black males from showcasing their actual academic abilities and competencies, and they are collectively referred to as the "saboteur." “Saboteur” is defined in the study as a collection of cognitions and emotions that develop into self-defeating patterns, adversely impacting behavior and serving as a defense mechanism to protect the self from discomfort. The saboteur is a source of protection that zones off negative feelings that arise when one questions one's ability and potential.

Disparities In Perceptions of Black Boys

Academically successful Black males during their K-12 tenure excel due to intrinsic motivation and holding high expectations for themselves. For Black boys, establishing positive relationships with teachers is critical to their academic achievement, but it can pose challenges. Black boys are more likely to encounter teachers who subscribe to deficit perspectives about Black students, resulting in low expectations for them. Black teacher expectations are crucial for the academic success of Black students, as Black teachers appear to teach more content with warmth and emotional engagement to children with whom they have high expectations. Low expectations from teachers

highlight the overrepresentation of Black boys in special education programs, underrepresentation in gifted and talented programs, and priming to enter the school-to-prison pipeline (Goings et al., 2018).

Goings et al.'s 2018 study examined the predictors of educational achievement and completion of bachelor's degrees among Black male students. It was found that when not accounting for the effect of socioeconomic status, student and teacher math expectations showed significant predictive value in determining the educational attainment of Black male students. However, the students' expectations proved to be the only significant predictor of completion of a bachelor's degree. A significant difference was revealed between Black male students who completed their bachelor's degrees versus those who did not. Those students who completed their bachelor's degree had higher academic achievement expectations, better teacher-student relationships, more parental involvement and expectations, and greater influence of friends.

Students of minority ethnicity are more likely to experience teacher expectation effects than those students with high SES and majority ethnic group peers (Johnston et al., 2021). Teachers who use differential behavior when interacting with students produce more significant expectation effects on their students than teachers who do not. Differential behavior communicates varying expectations for learning to students and sends them messages about their place in the classroom achievement hierarchy. Johnston et al.'s 2021 study examined how 10th-grade students perceived their teachers' expectations and how these perceptions appeared to impact their academic outcomes. Findings revealed that students' self-perceptions were related to the teacher's

communication of expectations. When a teacher communicates the belief that a student can succeed, the student adopts this belief and acts accordingly.

Given the time adolescents spend in school, school-based relationships and interactions play an important role in adolescents' experiences during this period (Cole-Lewis et al., 2021). Teacher expectations are based on numerous factors, including individual culture, personal experiences, beliefs, and social imagery. Teachers' expectations of Black boys stem from stereotypes about students' social identities, such as race, class, and gender, and affect student achievement. Cole-Lewis et al.'s 2021 study examined the disparities in perceptions among students, teachers, and parents regarding the academic and social experiences of two Black boys in middle school. The findings indicated a more substantial alignment between the boys' experiences and their parents' perceptions of them, in contrast to the teachers' perceptions. The teachers' reports often inaccurately reflected the boys' career aspirations, academic interests, and abilities. Early in their educational journey, starting in kindergarten, Black students are exposed to lower teacher expectations than their peers, as reflected in the teaching methods, testing practices, and feedback provided by teachers. Low teacher expectations harm students over time. Students whose first-grade teachers underestimated their math abilities, reading, and vocabulary scored lower than expected on standardized tests 10 years later (Cole-Lewis et al., 2021)

Racial and educational disparities have highlighted the role of teachers and the school environment they create for students (Burrell-Craft et al., 2022). Educators are recognized for their impact on student achievement, motivation, adjustment, behavior, and social-emotional well-being. Racial inequalities in the education system have drawn

attention to the pivotal role played by teachers and the atmosphere they create within schools for students. Given the importance of teachers in shaping the school climate, the interactions between teachers and students wield a notable impact on students' achievements. Burrell-Craft et al.'s 2022 study examined the relationships between race, skin tone, and the quality of teacher-student relationships (TSRs). The study used data from a comprehensive study involving a diverse group of 995 adolescents. The research identified significant associations between being Black, Hispanic, or Multi-racial and teacher-student relationships. There were no notable variations in teacher-student relationships among racial categories. Skin tone was not a noteworthy predictor of TSRs and did not influence the relationship between race and TSRs.

Principals' Beliefs and Values Shaping School Communities

Principal beliefs and values are instrumental in determining how context influences their praxis, particularly in “leader intent and interactions within various situations of practice” (Angelle, 2017, p. 5). The decision-making and behavior of principals are critical in establishing trust and credibility within the school community (Angelle, 2017). Angelle’s 2017 qualitative study focused on the efforts of two high school principals to develop a sense of community within their schools. The study examined these principals' accounts, values, beliefs, and actions through the perspectives of community membership, fulfilling needs, influence, and emotional connections. The findings revealed that despite leading schools in distinct contexts, both principals implemented systems and procedures that addressed the key components of the Sense of Community Theory framework. The framework emphasized membership, influence, meeting needs, and emotional connections as foundational for student success.

After many years of research, the answers remain unknown regarding the lack of achievement of Black males. The principal's critical role in facilitating change is creating welcoming learning spaces for all their students (Bass & Alston, 2018). Researchers identified poor schooling experiences as one of the many obstacles Black males face. Bass and Alston's 2018 study examines the professional obstacles that Black male leaders face and their decisions to lead schools in the face of these challenges. The article introduces the principles of the Black Masculine Caring (BMC) framework. The BMC framework was developed during the study of Black male leadership. The BMC framework addresses the unique learning needs of Black male students and how they require support to develop into productive men. The study's findings showed that Black male leaders, while facing the dilemma of having a flourishing career or cultivating conditions for disenfranchised students to thrive, recognized that fostering a school structure that prioritizes learning for all students is vital.

Principals need to deliver excellent, equitable educational opportunities while ensuring students achieve academically, graduate on time, and are career and college-ready (Cox & Mullen, 2023). The evidence for the impact of academic achievement on principals has been shown to be indirect. Cox & Mullen's (2023) qualitative case study aimed to explore the instructional actions taken by principals in rural, high-poverty schools and how those actions were perceived to influence student achievement. The study employed a qualitative case study approach to address two research questions: What instructional leadership practices are evident in rural, high-poverty schools, based on existing literature and findings? How do these practices impact academic achievement

in rural Title 1 schools, as reported by principals, assistant principals, instructional coaches, and teachers?

To investigate the impact of principalship on student achievement in low-income rural settings, two Title I schools were selected for study. Thirteen school participants participated, including two principals, one assistant principal, two instructional coaches, and eight teachers. The study yielded seven key findings that highlight impactful principal practices, aligning with existing research. Evidence-based strategies promoting instructional leadership and their positive influence on achievement in low-income, rural schools were identified, suggesting potential improvements in learning outcomes and overall school success. Data from stakeholders indicated a direct link between principals' practices and student achievement.

Rivera-McCutchen's 2021 case study of a successful Black male urban school principal provided an alternative narrative to prevalent discussions of failure in urban educational settings. The collected data revealed five essential components of effective school leadership, collectively forming a framework of radical care. These components encompass (a) adopting an antiracist and socially just stance, (b) cultivating genuine relationships, (c) having faith in the potential for growth and excellence in both students and teachers, (d) skillfully navigating the socio-political and policy landscape, and (e) embracing a spirit of radical hope. The study emphasized the urgency for leadership preparation firmly rooted in antiracism and social justice, encompassing all aspects of an ethic of radical care.

Cultivating ethical principles in children stands as a fundamental aspect of any society. It is widely acknowledged that, beyond academic instruction, schools play a vital

role in shaping students' character and instilling values such as curiosity, achievement, kindness, and civic responsibility. Brenson and Oreg's (2016) longitudinal study investigated the role of school principals in shaping children's values. Data were gathered from 252 school principals, 3,658 teachers, and 49,401 students. Results showed how children's values evolve and highlighted the profound influence of leaders' values. A link was found between principals' values and changes in children's values, attributed to the impact of school climate. The two-year study demonstrated that the children's values began to align with or resemble those of the principal. Research indicates that principals have a significant impact on school outcomes. A premise exists that organizations are reflections of their leaders, which happens through several mechanisms, one being climate and culture. Leaders express their values through their emphases and actions, such as rewarding behavior and consequences they choose, which then shape the organization's environment and gradually shape the values of followers (Brenson & Oreg, 2016).

Impact of School Climate on Academic Success

School climate is often described as student perceptions of the cultural norms, values, practices, and relationships associated with school life (Daily et al., 2020). For students, school climate is often based on (a) interpersonal connections, such as bonding with school staff and friends; (b) school safety, such as admiration and compliance with school rules; (c) academic equity, such as a sense of fair treatment and accomplishment in school; (d) school satisfaction such as personal contentment with studies and experiences; and (e) school connection such as social bonding or identifying with the school environment (Daily et al., 2020). A school climate is considered “positive” when

students consistently positively describe the foundations above. Daily et al.'s 2020 longitudinal study examined how preventing students' academic failure is crucial to the overall success of students' health and well-being. The study investigated the relationship between school climate and academic performance among middle school students transitioning into high school. Data were collected from 2604 students in 6th, 7th, and 8th grades across 16 regional schools in West Virginia.

Voight et al.'s 2015 study employed data from student and teacher surveys collected across more than 400 middle schools in California to explore disparities within schools regarding students' perceptions of the school climate based on their racial backgrounds. The study investigated the connection between racial disparities in a school's climate and disparities in academic achievement, along with other factors within the school environment that may shed light on why certain schools exhibit more pronounced or lesser racial disparities in students' climate perceptions. The findings within the study revealed that, on average, Black and Hispanic students in middle schools have fewer positive experiences with safety, sense of belonging, interactions with adults, and opportunities for participation in comparison to White students, which challenged the conventional understanding of uniform "school climate." The research also demonstrated that specific racial disparities in the school climate exhibit varying degrees across different middle schools, and in cases where these disparities are more significant, the racial achievement gap is also more pronounced.

Significant links exist between school climate dimensions and various youth adjustment outcomes. One school climate factor that tends to be prominent across all schools is having caring teachers or adults (Ebbert & Luthar, 2021). Feelings of

alienation from teachers and adults at school are a significant component of the school climate. Teachers must also show an understanding of students' diverse backgrounds by maintaining respect for diversity. Research has shown that teachers who value diverse experiences provide students with a sense of belonging, which may lead to positive outcomes (Ebbert & Luthar, 2021).

Ebbert and Luthar's 2021 study investigated the strength of connections between various elements of school atmosphere and outcomes related to adaptation among a specific vulnerable group: students attending high-achieving schools. Using three diverse high schools as samples, results indicated that (a) notable variations existed between schools based on location and type, and (b) connections between dimensions of school atmosphere and adolescent adjustment remained strong even after accounting for the quality of parent-child relationships. Among the various aspects of the school atmosphere, harmful elements such as feeling disconnected from teachers and perceiving a tolerance for bullying consistently showed links with problematic symptoms. Conversely, positive indicators of school atmosphere, such as having supportive adults at school and valuing diversity, consistently showed connections with positive adjustment outcomes.

Factors Shaping Academic Success and School Climate For Black Boys

Schools are in a key position to promote academic success and serve as a haven for students whose circumstances increase their likelihood of academic failure. Murray et al.'s 2021 study aimed to identify individual and school-related factors crucial for the academic achievement of African American students. Data were gathered from 2020 African American students across 463 schools as part of the longitudinal study. The

findings showed that the average African American student's probability of academic success on a national scale stood at 11 percent. The student level revealed that the impact of socioeconomic status on academic achievement was more prominent among students who showed lower levels of commitment to their peers' academic pursuits. Several protective factors that enhanced the likelihood of academic success were identified, which included school engagement, teacher expectations, and the amount of time spent on homework. Protective factors were associated with the academic environment on a broader school level, suggesting that a favorable academic climate supports student success. African American students in schools with stronger academic climates were more likely to succeed academically than those in schools with weaker climates (Murray et al., 2021).

One explanation for the achievement gap between African American males and their peers is the school climate. School climate is described by Jackson et al. (2021) as a multidimensional factor influencing student academic outcomes. One dimension of school climate that affects Black males is the relationship between students and school staff. The importance of fostering a positive school environment is widely acknowledged. Black male students encounter a unique set of factors that shape their school experience. Jackson et al.'s 2021 study investigated whether the school environment played a role in mediating the connections between how these students view themselves in math and their actual math performance. The results indicated a positive correlation between how students saw themselves in math and their math scores. Furthermore, the analyses demonstrated that the school environment played a partial mediating role in explaining the link between math identity and academic outcomes.

Black boys encounter educational difficulties during their early school years that later harm their ability to attend college. Being a Black male in American schools has an associated risk of several negative consequences, such as school failure, being placed in special education, and violence (Davis, 2003). However, the educational outcomes are even more troubling for Black American males, posing a significant crisis for both the nation and the Black community. The failure to achieve higher education leads to various challenges for this group, including unemployment, involvement in gangs, violence, incarceration, and ongoing poverty across generations (Howard, 2013).

Access is not the primary issue for African American males enrolling in AP courses in high school. In that case, Mcardle et al. (2021) suggest that the climate and culture of suburban schools pose complex challenges that African American male students must navigate to succeed in AP English. Mcardle et al.'s 2021 study of eight African American males enrolled in AP classes at a Mid-Atlantic suburban high school identified six supportive sources vital to their success in AP English. These included support in three social areas: wisdom, guidance, and care received from family members, English teachers, and peers, as well as personal resources identified as those related to college aspirations, persistence in learning academic literacies, and racial consciousness. All of these factors contributed to their academic success in AP English.

Strategies to improve school climate and individual social-emotional learning can also enhance the academic performance of students of color, ultimately contributing to more racially equitable educational outcomes. School climate refers to the “social, emotional, and physical characteristics of a school community,” offering a window into students’ school experiences (Jones et al., 2020, p. 3). Jones et al.’s 2020 study examined

how students' perceptions of school climate and their own SEL contribute to racial discrepancies in self-reported grades. Asian and Latinx students indicated slightly more favorable perceptions of the school climate, while multiracial students reported significantly fewer positive perceptions than White students. Across all racial groups, students reported lower levels of SEL than their White counterparts.

Parker and Wilkins's 2018 study explored the interaction between self-determination skills and engagement in the school of three non-disabled, underachieving Black males in the ninth grade. The participants were part of a more extensive study. The primary researcher recruited ten ninth-grade males from a public laboratory school to gain insights into their perceptions of classroom autonomy support. The research employed a qualitative case study methodology and adopted a deductive approach to analyze the collected data. The findings identified three self-determination skills that interacted with the participants' engagement in school: (a) self-awareness, (b) self-regulation, and (c) expressing preferences. The study revealed that, despite a lack of comprehensive research, the independent utilization of various self-determination skills by Black male students may contribute to their engagement in school.

The Role of Principals in Teacher Commitment and School Success

Research has shown that principals are central to developing and sustaining teacher commitment to their school. Teachers' commitment to their school impacts teaching, learning, innovation, and school climate and manifests in job satisfaction (Price, 2021). Price's 2021 study of principals' roles in cultivating and sustaining teacher commitment to their school showed that schools where teachers possessed lower levels of commitment towards the end of the school year were least likely to retain them, thereby

maintaining a stable teaching force for the following school year. Those principals who sustained trusted relationships upheld a climate of organizational trust and oriented themselves toward their teachers. Students were shown to maintain a stable and more significant commitment to their teachers.

School principals play a central role in ensuring a positive teaching and learning environment (Liebowitz & Porter, 2019). While there are methodological challenges in quantifying principals' impact on student learning, solid evidence suggests that principals are essential factors in the unpredictability of student learning gains across schools and over time. Liebowitz and Porter reviewed 51 empirical studies investigating the connection between principal behaviors and student, teacher, and school outcomes. They discovered direct evidence demonstrating the relationship between principal behaviors and outcomes: student achievement, teacher well-being, instructional practices, and overall school organizational health. These researchers emphasized the importance of principal behaviors extending beyond instructional management, suggesting that these behaviors could serve as practical tools for improving student achievement outcomes.

The school principal is considered one of the most influential individuals on a school campus. The principal sets the day's tone, leads the school community in creating a vision for success, and devises and executes a plan to carry out the vision (Jafeth et al., 2022). The principals' commitment to building a strong model of shared leadership and a favorable school climate, characterized by high collaboration, fosters academic achievement. Jafeth et al.'s (2022) study of teachers' perceptions of principal leadership practices in a large urban high school district in the Western United States revealed that older teachers perceived themselves as less engaged and less involved in the school

climate. Those with principals for less time and possibly more beginner teachers perceived the principals' practice more positively. Results showed that teachers' perceptions of the way their principal carried out leadership practices were associated with higher levels of perceived favorable school climate in higher-performing schools and schools serving impoverished students.

The Impact of Teacher-Student Relationships on Academic Success

African Americans' academic performance, more so than that of other students, is significantly influenced by the social support and encouragement they receive from teachers. Positive teacher relationships help promote high achievement and academic aspirations for Black students. A 2019 study by Broome found that parents and peers were more potent predictors of grades, followed by teachers. Broome's 2019 study emphasized the multifaceted approach needed for African American men and boys to succeed academically. Broome conducted a qualitative analysis of the schooling experiences of 20 Black men who graduated from an all-boys public charter school in a large urban city to identify how the students create meaning from their school experiences and academic success. Findings in this study showed that (a) school culture and (b) relationships were critical components of their school experience that molded their achievement and academic success.

Establishing and maintaining relationships is essential to Black Americans in various settings, including schools. Due to racism, students may find it difficult to completely engage in their educational process without positive relationships with their teachers and school personnel. High expectations and caring teacher-student relationships are essential to student success (Grace & Nelson, 2019). Grace and Nelson's 2019 study

explored how Black male students view the influence of race and racism in support of the school-to-prison pipeline. The study delves into the perspectives of ten Black male students in the New Orleans region. The findings of the research imply that the students perceive racism as inescapable in both society and schools, while also noting that low expectations from teachers contribute to the continuation of the school-to-prison pipeline. Study participants disclosed that schools might engage other successful Black male individuals who have effectively navigated the educational system to support better those Black male students who face the risk of entering the school-to-prison pipeline.

Relationships are crucial to children's development, and teacher-student relationships are no exception. Early theorists state that learning does not just occur as a transfer of knowledge but through interaction with an educator. Educators must understand these relationships to build equitable educational practices for Black boys (Leverette, 2022). Leverett's 2022 study examined how Black male middle-school students perceive the student-teacher relationship. The study of 12 Black boys attending a public middle school in two urban districts in the Midwest highlighted several key points: the need for individual recognition, the importance of warm and authentic relationships to foster a sense of connection with the school environment, and the acknowledgment that racism acts as a barrier to developing strong student-teacher relationships and an overall sense of belonging. Insights from the study could significantly enhance student-teacher relationships, positively impact students' well-being and identity development, and help address achievement gaps among Black boys.

Young people are impressionable, and teachers may be a significant source of guidance. Unfortunately, teachers often hold unrecognized racial biases that possibly

impact African American youth. St. Mary et al.'s (2018) study of the lived experiences and perceptions of academic achievement of 25 African American elementary and middle school students found that inequity and internalization of messages, teachers as gatekeepers, family and community factors promoting and exhibiting academic success, and cultural considerations such as language, stereotypes, and differences were emerging themes. Support in those areas made students feel like their academic success was not inhibited. On the contrary, when students perceived a lack of support in those categories, they felt their academic success was inhibited.

Principal Perception of Students

Principals play a pivotal role in shaping the educational environment, and their perceptions of students can significantly impact academic outcomes. The lens through which principals view their students, whether framed by expectations, biases, or preconceived notions, can influence the educational opportunities afforded to everyone. Liebowitz and Porter's 2019 study conducted a comprehensive review of empirical literature encompassing 51 studies that explored the link between principal behaviors and various outcomes, including student achievement, teacher well-being, instructional practices, and school organizational health. Three key findings emerged: firstly, there was direct evidence indicating a positive relationship between principal behaviors and student achievement, teacher well-being, teacher instructional practices, and school organizational health; second, the study highlighted the significance of principal behaviors extending beyond instructional management as potential tools for improving student achievement outcomes; and finally, it noted that the existing evidence primarily

relied on observational studies, with a lack of causal evidence in the base on school leadership behaviors.

Urick and Bower's 2014 study aimed to investigate the distinct and direct impacts of both student and principal perceptions of the academic climate on the achievement of high school students. A limited body of research currently explores how principals' perceptions of the educational environment may influence student achievement. The study's objective was to analyze the independent effects of principal and student perceptions of academic climate on student achievement in mathematics. The findings indicated that a principal's perception of academic climate may directly influence student achievement.

Wu and Shen's 2021 study examined the findings on the relationship between principal leadership and student achievement. The analysis revealed a statistically significant positive association between principal leadership and student achievement. Several key points were highlighted: (a) a trend toward more consistent and precise estimates of the impact of principal leadership on student achievement emerged with the accumulation of knowledge; (b) there was still insufficient evidence to advocate for a specific leadership model or practice as more effective than others in enhancing student achievement, and (c) the effect of principal leadership appeared to be moderated by educational contexts.

Research Questions

The educational challenges Black males face are undeniable, with stereotypes, disparities in discipline, and harmful societal expectations often negatively impacting their academic progress. Recognizing that Black males can elevate above these barriers

with an intensive effort from educators, families, and communities is critical. Through mentorship, guidance, and a supportive environment, Black males can be empowered to reach their fullest potential. Their deficits can no longer be the focal point; it should be about honoring their strengths, unique perspectives, and resilience. This research aimed to identify the most effective factors that foster academic success among Black males.

The following questions were used to build the framework of research:

1. What educational factors do Black males/men now leading productive lives attribute to their success?
2. What would Black males/men now leading productive lives like to tell educational leaders about how to support all students, especially Black male students?
3. What do Black men now living productive lives think are the factors affecting the achievement level of all students, especially Black male students?

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This study aimed to understand the educational experiences of Black male students in K-12 education. The intent was to identify the factors that contributed to their success and to inform educators about what worked.

Data Collection Procedures

A qualitative design was employed for this research. Qualitative research involved exploring a phenomenon within its real-world context, employing inductive data analysis to uncover patterns, and emphasizing the meaning that participants attribute to the issue (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Phenomenology sought to comprehend the mutually shared feelings of participants (Irvine, 2019). In this study, the phenomenon was post-secondary graduate success. This study focused on exploring the educational experiences of Black male K-12 students to understand the phenomenon of these experiences and their relationship to current success outcomes.

The primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews. This approach allowed for flexibility while ensuring critical topics were covered. The interview guide was developed based on a thorough literature review and pilot-tested to refine questions and provide clarity.

Interview Process

Depending on participant preference and logistical considerations, interviews were conducted either in person or via virtual platforms. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes. With participants' informed consent, audio recordings

were made to ensure data accuracy, and field notes were employed to supplement the recorded material and capture contextual nuances (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The interview protocol was designed to elicit rich, reflective narratives regarding participants' educational trajectories, particularly within the context of public schooling. Questions explored personal experiences with public education, the perceived impact of academic achievement on future opportunities, and the influence of specific educational moments on individual success as Black males. Participants were invited to articulate their visions of ideal educational environments, assess the role of mentorship in their academic development, and evaluate the significance of representation, such as the presence of Black educators.

Further questions addressed the influence of familial involvement in education, reflections on challenges faced and overcome, and the broader emotional and social dimensions of their K–12 experiences. Participants also considered the attributes they believed contributed to their success and offered advice for other Black boys pursuing educational achievement despite systemic barriers.

This interview framework was guided by a commitment to culturally responsive inquiry and ethical research engagement, centering the voices and lived experiences of Black male participants to ensure authenticity and relevance in the data collection process. Among the interview questions were:

1. What were your personal experiences with public education?
2. How would you describe the importance of academic achievement in shaping future opportunities based on your experiences?

3. Can you think of a specific educational experience or moment that contributed significantly to your success as a Black Male?
4. What is the ideal educational environment for Black males?
5. How do you feel your K-12 educational experience contributed to your success?
6. What is your definition of success, and based on that definition, how do you know you are successful?
7. How do you think mentorship affects educational outcomes for Black male students?
8. Have you ever had a Black teacher? If so, how did that impact your educational experience? If not, how would it have affected your academic experience?
9. How involved were your parents or guardians in your education? How did their involvement impact your experiences in school?
10. Looking back on your educational journey, can you share a particular challenge you experienced and how you overcame it?
11. Looking back on your educational journey, can you think of a teacher who was your favorite or contributed positively to your journey?
12. What is the worst thing that has happened to you in your K-12 experience?
13. Looking back on your educational journey, what advice would you give to other Black males aiming for success in their academic pursuits?
14. What advice do you have for other Black boys who want to succeed despite some of the challenges they may face along their educational journey?

15. What qualities did you possess that propelled you to success despite the educational barriers that existed?

Sampling

Participants were recruited by snowball sampling. The participants for this study were purposively selected based on specific criteria. Inclusion criteria included self-identified Black males who, at a minimum, had successfully graduated from high school, established stable relationships, demonstrated financial responsibility, and led productive lives that showed them to be solid citizens. I allowed respondents to self-define success. It was a sense of an individual's self-worth. The sample size was intended to ensure diversity in experiences. Participants in the study were Black males from diverse backgrounds, primarily residing in the Northeastern United States.

Data Analysis

This study employed a phenomenological approach as the guiding framework for data analysis. A phenomenological study described the ordinary meaning of a concept or phenomenon for several individuals based on their lived experiences (Creswell, 2018). Phenomenology sought to comprehend the mutually shared feelings of participants (Irvine, 2019). The analysis from the phenomenological approach provided a more comprehensive understanding of the study of successful African American men and how their lived experiences with the K-12 educational system influenced their success. It was considered imperative to understand everyday experiences in order to develop effective practices or policies, or to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon's features (Creswell, 2018). Analysis through the phenomenological approach followed systematic procedures that move from narrow units of study, such as significant statements, to

broader units, detailed descriptions that summarize two elements: “what” the individuals had experienced and “how” they had experienced it (Creswell, 2018). Data analysis occurred throughout the study. Data were collected from individual participants through in-depth and multiple interviews. Detailed notes of all activities related to the study were collected, such as observations, journals, meetings, interactions, and interviews. Recorded interviews and interview notes were transcribed and saved.

Familiarization with the data occurred through an in-depth examination of each transcript, focusing on crucial material to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of each participant and inform the study. The method of horizontalization involves sorting through data to identify patterns. Horizontalization required the researcher to sort through the data and highlight “significant statements,” sentences, or quotes that provide a deeper understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2018). After reviewing the ancillary data, the open coding process was employed to identify significant concepts, ideas, and themes. Next, a textual description of the individual participants’ experiences was created. Textual descriptions provide significant themes for writing descriptions of what participants experienced. Researchers employ the method of imaginative variation, also known as structural description. Structural descriptions are used to describe the context or setting that influenced how participants experienced the phenomenon, also known as imaginative variation (Creswell, 2018).

The final report for this study adopted a descriptive narrative format. In the appendix, readers can find interview questions and additional artifacts. The report comprehensively portrayed the phenomenon, drawing on insights from participants’

experiences, perspectives, actions, and interpretations. The final section presents the limitations, implications, and future research directions.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This study examined what worked and what did not work for successful Black men during their K-12 education and how those experiences contributed to their success in life. I gathered qualitative data through 30- to 60-minute individual semi-structured interviews with men who identified as African American, as shown in Chapter 3. This study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of how their K-12 experiences contributed to their success in life. This study aimed to explore the K-12 experiences of successful Black men. These factors either contributed to or posed barriers to their success, as well as suggestions for how Black males can be supported within the school system.

Several themes emerged from this research, including the role and influence of families, communities, schools, teachers, and personal characteristics that affect the K-12 experiences of Black male students. Within the context of each research question, these themes fall into specific categories, detailed more thoroughly. The phenomenological approach was suitable for this study, as it enabled participants to share their experiences throughout their K-12 journey. The interview questions were analyzed and interpreted by axial coding, reading, and interpreting, identifying recurring patterns and themes. This chapter provides a detailed description of the participants and findings for each of the four research questions:

1. What educational factors do Black males/men now leading productive lives attribute to their success?

2. What would Black males/men now leading productive lives like to tell educational leaders about how to support all students, especially Black male students?
3. What do Black men now living productive lives think are the factors affecting the achievement level of all students, especially Black male students?

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach to explore the factors that contributed to the life success of Black male students during their K-12 experiences, identifying what worked and what did not. This design aimed to gain further insight into what factors contributed to their success as Black men. The 19 participants were asked a series of open-ended interview questions. The interview questions can be found in Appendix C. Participants were selected using a snowball sampling method. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and provided with consent forms. The interviewees were scheduled, and interviews were conducted. The interviews were conducted through Zoom meetings. Each interview was audio-recorded and video-recorded through Zoom's audio and recording features. The interview audio was transcribed through Zoom's software. After every interview, the transcripts were examined to ensure accuracy. A thematic analysis was used to identify themes and patterns from the interview participants' responses.

Description of Participants

A snowball sample of 19 participants met the criteria of being a Black male who also identifies as an African American male. The Black men were, at a minimum, high school graduates and employed. Most Black men completed their K-12 years in the

Northeastern region of the United States, particularly New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and New York City. The pseudonyms for the 19 men selected for the study are BM, which stands for Black Man, followed by a corresponding identifying number. The interviewees varied in age and occupation, see Table 4.1 for details.

Table 4.1

Black Male Participant Demographics

Participant	Occupation	Education Level	Age
Black Man 1	Delivery Driver	Associates	37
Black Man 2	Community Economic Development	MBA	43
Black Man 3	School Principal	MA	37
Black Man 4	Financial Advisor	MA	38
Black Man 5	Project Manager; Assessments	MA	37
Black Man 6	Traffic Control Technician	High School Dip.	34
Black Man 7	U.S. Postal Service	BA	26
Black Man 8	Assistant Principal	MA	34
Black Man 9	Commercial Litigator	JD & MA	35
Black Man 10	Principal K-8	Doctorate	39
Black Man 11	State Attorney	JD	51
Black Man 12	School Administrator	MA	40
Black Man 13	Entrepreneur; Media Production Co.	MA	38
Black Man 14	Superintendent	MA	48
Black Man 15	Assistant Principal	MA	44
Black Man 16	Director of Educational Opportunity Fund	Doctorate	38
Black Man 17	Support Staff 1 to 1	BA	38
Black Man 18	Entrepreneur	PhD in Finance	53
Black Man 19	Educator	BA	38

Data Analysis

This study examined the K-12 experiences of Black men, gained insight into what worked and what did not, explored the influences that contributed to who they are today, and how these factors have contributed to their success. I curated the interview questions, reviewed them by the department chair, and wrote the final questions. The individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. A thorough analysis of the participants' interviews produced the data set. The participants' interviews were recorded and transcribed to establish trustworthiness. Due to the lack of relevant literature on the K-12 school experiences of successful Black boys, this study was created to examine their experiences and gain insight into what they believe contributed to their life success.

RQ #1 What educational factors do Black men now leading productive lives attribute to their success?

Parental Involvement and Family Support

Several participants emphasized the importance of parental involvement and the support of families who advocated for their academic and personal success. Some of the following accounts emphasize advocacy, high expectations, and family engagement to increase the likelihood of success for Black boys. BM 3, a 37-year-old principal, showed the impact of his father's involvement in shaping his education, sharing, "As I got older and moved into middle school, my father played a big role in shaping my education. He ensured I was placed in classes that minimized distractions and kept me away from environments that might have held me back. All of that helped me reach my potential."

Similarly, BM 19, a 38-year-old substitute teacher with a Bachelor's degree in communication, acknowledged the factors that advocacy and persistent parental

involvement played in his success. “My mom’s a retired math teacher. She was very adamant that, no matter where we lived, I was going to get a good education. She was gonna be on the teacher’s ass, which I respected and appreciated because you have to advocate for your child. A lot of parents give teachers too much trust, which I think can be problematic at times.”

BM 4, a 38-year-old financial advisor, continued to emphasize the need for advocacy, especially for Black boys who have to navigate an educational system that can be unfair:

My father was a strict disciplinarian. Every morning, he told us we were getting up, making our beds, going to school, and coming home with no grade lower than a B. I was more scared of letting him down than anything else. I know for a fact that my father going up to the school and demanding that I be placed in certain classes made a difference in my trajectory. Many Black parents don’t know they can do that, or they don’t feel empowered to do that.

Some participants shared that their parents’ academic accomplishments and views on education instilled in them a strong understanding of the value of education.

Both my parents were very interested in my education. My mom got her bachelor’s degree in business before I was born, so she prioritized education, and my dad was a teacher. It was clear to me that education mattered. I just figured I was supposed to be good at this.

BM 15, a 44-year-old assistant principal, shared how experiencing parental involvement in his life molded his mindset,

I always really reflect on my parents. They gave me this poster saying, 'Quest for success.' I really had no idea what that really meant, but I just knew I wanted to be successful. So they gave me that mental training of 'It's not gonna be easy, but just keep pushing through.' So, I wouldn't really say it was education; I think it was more home-driven. My teachers were supportive, but I think they were supportive because my family was supportive.

Some participants spoke about the invaluableity of having both parents involved in their education. BM 17, a 38-year-old Teacher’s aide, remarked, “Having my parents

involved in my education was a blessing. I realized as I got older that not everyone has that level of support growing up.”

Participants shared their experiences with a lack of parental involvement, which significantly hindered their educational progress. BM 1, a 37-year-old Amazon delivery driver with an associate's degree in criminal justice, shared,

To be honest, I think more parental involvement would have changed a lot. In 6th grade, I was around 12 years old, and I feel like I could have used more help and guidance with things. At that time, I did not really have much support at home when it came to school. I remember getting left behind in 6th grade because I never did my homework. Thinking back, my mom or dad never asked me if I had completed my homework or made sure that I did it. I'd come home, and it was like nobody really followed up to see if I had anything to do for school. I think if my parents had been more involved and checked up on me, making sure I stayed on track, it could have made a big difference.

Participants acknowledged that the lack of parental involvement had an adverse effect on their academic performance, and some believed it also had a negative emotional impact. BM 18, a 53-year-old entrepreneur with a PhD in Finance, ruminated on his experience,

Some of the stress at home came from parents who didn't really understand what I was feeling, and then going into a new place, the school, where I didn't know, I'd be lost. I wanted to do good every year; I'd start out saying, 'Okay, I'm gonna figure it out, make good grades,' but I never could. A lot of what I was dealing with emotionally really just came from feeling very unloved by anybody, including my parents, who loved me, but they were too busy to really express that.

BM 2, a 43-year-old community economic developer in the city of Philadelphia, inserted another view: “My mother was a high school teacher. She helped me with writing a lot, but outside of that, she was hands-off. She didn't have the time or energy as a single parent with three kids, working as a teacher herself.”

Mentorship And Role Models

A critical emerging theme from participant interviews was the role that mentorship played in shaping the academic and overall success of Black boys. Participants acknowledged mentorship as essential, but with varying perspectives on the influence of race, gender, and a clear distinction between direct and indirect mentorship.

Several participants emphasized the value placed on direct mentorship. Participants shared how they viewed it as a source of being held accountable, encouraged, and achieving academic success. BM 1 shared that he believed having a mentor in middle school could have had a positive impact on him.

I just feel like a mentor would have been on me. Somebody, you know, to keep me focused. Keep me straight in school, like making sure I did my homework and making sure I was doing what I needed to do at school.

BM 3, a 37-year-old school principal, reflected on how his first Black teacher served as a mentor, providing him with a model to aspire to, which ultimately inspired him to become an educator and changed his academic trajectory.

My first Black mentor was my high school football coach, Sam Jenkins. I never had a Black male teacher in middle school or elementary school, so when I got to high school, it was a big deal for me to see my football coach, who played football at Temple University and was a local legend. He had a profound impact on me and was one of the reasons I decided to pursue a career in teaching.

Several participants spoke about the significance of having a Black male mentor, citing the potential for commonalities, such as shared lived experiences, which can foster a deeper relationship and understanding. BM 11, a 51-year-old state attorney, explained how having a Black mentor with whom he could connect culturally was impactful.

It goes back to the connection. Young Black men need the mentorship of Black men. Coach Cummings was more than just a coach to me; he also knew my family. He could lay a hand on you now and then, and you know, out of love, he'd take you to the locker room and rough you up a little bit, but you know, never hurt you. But you know, it's kind of like that big brother.

BM 4, a 38-year-old financial advisor, added to this,

I feel like the educational system is made for white children. When you have somebody who's able to shepherd somebody through an unnatural environment, I think that's the difference. I think mentorship is so important, especially when adult Black males take an interest in it.

BM 19, a 38-year-old substitute teacher, highlighted mentorship as a tool for contesting the societal limitations placed on Black boys.

I think, in general, it's a great benefit, but I think it's required for Black students. We're not supposed to be successful in education. That's not an expectation of us. So, mentorship means everything because it shows you the end game. It shows you what the finish line looks like. Mentorship means everything because mentorship shows you. It shows you what the finish line looks like or gets you closer to the finish line, and you need that.

BM 9, a 35-year-old commercial litigator, echoed similar sentiments by sharing how representation in mentorship is empowering for Black boys.

Mentors make a difference. Seeing a Black male, someone who looks like you, doing something you want to do, or even something you never thought was possible, is vast. It removes the excuses and shows you that you can do it.

Some participants emphasized the importance of direct mentorship, but they also acknowledged that observing successful Black men in their educational environment, both informally and formally, had an equally impactful effect. BM 14, a 48-year-old superintendent, explained:

It is essential to have someone to look up to. Even if it's not a direct mentor, you have models from whom you can learn. When you have someone who is consistently there for you, like my football coach, it changes trajectory.

BM 16, a 38-year-old director of an educational opportunity fund at a New Jersey county college, shared similar sentiments.

Mentorship is important. To have somebody to look at. Even if I'm watching from afar, I might not say you're my mentor formally, but you're still a model to me. Like, okay, I see how you handle things. So, even if it's not formal

mentorship, just having people who look like you or with whom you connect is essential.

Participant responses revealed that mentorship has a significant influence on the academic success of Black boys when mentors encourage, coupled with guidance. BM 12, a 40-year-old school administrator, shared, “Mentorship plays a huge role in academic outcomes. Every student needs a champion who believes in and motivates them. I had Ms. Smith, and I try to be that mentor for the students I teacher.”

BM 13, a 38-year-old owner of a media company in Philadelphia, expanded on the cultural importance of mentorship academically in Black boys: “We need cool-ass motherfucking teachers, Black men who show younger Black boys that reading is interesting. Excelling academically becomes more relevant when you see cool motherfuckers do it too. It becomes a cultural thing.”

Participants expressed that schools could serve as a bridge of mentorship for those students who do not have mentors in their personal lives. BM 4, a 38-year-old financial advisor, remarked, “Mentorship is huge, man. I didn’t really have one growing up, and I wish I did. Black boys need someone they can relate to, someone who’s been through what they’re going through. Mentorship programs in school would make a big difference.” Finally, while all participants shared that having a mentor who was male and of the same race was needed was preferred for Black boys, it was not the end-all be-all. Participants expressed that mentorship can come from any caring individual, regardless of race.

BM 4, a 38-year-old financial advisor, emphasized that mentorship is primarily about guidance, support, and encouragement, and as long as these are provided, race should not be a factor. BM 4 shared, “Seeing a teacher who looked like me made me feel

at home, but at the same time, it shouldn't matter where the help comes from. Accept the help where it is given.”

Teacher Expectations And Support From Educators

A consistent theme that emerged from participant interviews was the vital role that teachers' expectations play in shaping the academic trajectory of Black boys. Participants highlighted the elevated or high teacher expectations, accompanied by the accountability placed on students by teachers, as factors that motivated them to exceed what they believed possible. Several participants (n = 14) reported positive experiences with teachers who held them to high academic and behavioral standards. Participant responses extended beyond academic performance to encompass character development and resilience. Participants also described teachers as individuals who demanded the best while indicating a vested interest in their success.

Participant BM 1, a 37-year-old Amazon delivery driver, reflected on his experience and said, “If a teacher takes that extra time and puts that type of extra effort into the kids, they're going to give you more. It'll play a part in how good they do.” Participant BM 2, a 43-year-old community developer from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, reverberated a similar sentiment. “Where I've seen Black males thrive is where they build this weird, crazy love bond almost with their teachers. The teachers have a high standard for you, and they're challenging you. But they're also not giving up on you.”

Teachers having high expectations for Black boys proved critical to their academic success. Not only was it necessary for high expectations to be expressed to Black boys, but participants expressed that when teachers communicated belief in their

potential while holding them accountable, it created a sense of belonging and responsibility in the students.

Participant BM 15, a 44-year-old assistant principal, expressed:

Positive teachers with high expectations redirect energy in the classroom. They communicate that what you may think is valuable isn't, and here's what is valuable, or this is what's valuable, and if you want to be valued here for what is the most valuable thing, then you must meet these expectations.

Several participants (n = 10) further emphasized the pivotal role teachers play in their lives by holding them accountable and setting high expectations for Black boys.

Participant B12, a 51-year-old New Jersey state attorney, shared,

My teacher pulled me onto the rug and said, 'I'm going to call you on this. You're too smart to be acting foolish for no reason. Miss M. stood out, pulled me to the line, and said, 'Hey, look. This is what I expect from you. I expect nothing less, and I know you can do more than what you're doing. So that's what I expect from you.

Participant BM 8, a 34-year-old Assistant principal of a school in Pennsylvania, shared how the love and genuine care he felt from his teachers magnified the impact of high expectations from them because of the genuine connection he shared:

Miss Crawford, my math teacher, is a light-skinned woman. She went to church down the street from where I live. I remember seeing her all the time. The one thing she said: 'I'm holding you accountable because this is the expectation. No, no, this is what you're going to do with this because I'm telling you this is what you're going to do, period!' And it was never an expectation of, 'All right, let me change. Let me move the mile marker for this young man so that he can feel like he's successful.

Several participants stressed the positive impact high teacher expectations had on Black boys. In contrast, other participants spoke about the harm caused by teachers with low expectations for Black boys. Participant B16, a 38-year-old Director of the Educational Opportunity Fund at a community college in New Jersey, divulged what he felt about the long-term damage teachers inflicted on Black boys when they did not

believe in them. He shared, “If you’re a teacher, you’re a weapon of mass destruction when you have low expectations for students. In 25 years of service, you can do a lot of damage with negative expectations.”

Participant B7, a 26-year-old United States postal worker in Philadelphia, shared similar sentiments with an impactful reflection of how low expectations can damage a Black student and the importance of holding all students, but more importantly, Black students, to a higher standard:

Looking at a kid and saying he's Black, so I don't think he's going to be that successful, is ridiculous to me. That's the worst form of racism. There is a bar, and if you're not here, you're not doing it right. This is the bar, and this is not good enough. I need it here.

Participant BM 19, a 38-year-old substitute teacher, shared strong feelings as they related to low teacher expectations of Black students, holding them back.

Negative teacher expectations hold students back. If you come in thinking that these Black kids can't achieve the same as white kids, you're going to treat them differently, and that's not fair to anyone. That mindset can do more harm than good.

Several participants shared how low teacher expectations contributed to disengagement in the classroom. Participant B17, a 38-year-old Teacher Assistant, shared, “Negative teacher expectations are probably one of the biggest detriments. If a teacher comes in assuming Black kids are going to be terrible, they treat them like the rest of the world treats them. School is supposed to be the opposite of that.” Several participants emphasized the importance of high teacher expectations and the accountability that teachers hold them to as students, which provides participants with confidence and leads to academic and personal success.

BM 6, a 34-year-old traffic control technician, expressed his sentiments towards the educators who held high expectations for them as a student and did not waver in their expectations. “My best teachers, regardless of race, were the ones who didn’t let me take shortcuts. They challenged me and didn’t let me settle for less.” Participant BM 11, who described himself as a 51-year-old state attorney, expressed similar feelings, highlighting the impact of teachers with unwavering expectations placed on him. He shared:

Miss Smith, my one Black teacher, without her, I wouldn't be where I am today. Miss Smith had high expectations for me. She wouldn't tolerate me coming in and doing the bare minimum, even though I had the ability. That ability wasn't nurtured before, and I was coasting because it was easy. Miss Smith said, “No, if it's easy, it's not enough.” She laid down clear expectations and backed them up, not with tough love, but with real love.

Participant BM 4 also shared how the role of unwavering teacher expectations encouraged students to grow in self-belief, which led to him surpassing expectations. He remarked, “I think positive teacher expectations are critical. Like, you know, having a teacher come in with the belief that you can be good. You're helping that student, but if a teacher comes in without that, it's destructive.”

Participant BM 8, a 34-year-old Assistant Principal, expressed a similar appreciation for his teacher's unwavering expectations,

My math teacher, a light-skinned woman. She went to church down the street from where I live. I remember seeing her all the time. The one thing she said was, I'm holding you accountable because this is the expectation. No, no, this is what you're going to do with this because I'm telling you this is what you're going to do, Period! And it was never an expectation of all right; let me change. Let me move the mile marker for this young man so that he can feel successful, rather than wishing for me to be successful.

Empathetic Teacher Relationships

A recurring theme across participant narratives was the critical importance of student-educator relationships in cultivating student academic engagement and overall

success. Several participants shared that when educators establish trust and make students feel cared for, they feel more motivated, engrossed, and supported in their educational endeavors. BM 6, a 34-year-old Traffic Control Technician, highlighted the importance of how teachers approach students when there is no established relationship. He remarked,

Rules without a relationship lead to rebellion. That teacher and I didn't have a relationship. The approach was more of an authority perspective, not caring about who I was, what I was experiencing, or what I was going through. Everything was about how I was doing in your classroom, so now I don't feel safe listening to you. I see you as a threat.

Similar sentiments were reiterated by several participants who reflected on experiences where teachers failed to establish trust, which made students feel unseen and unsupported. Participant interviews also revealed that for many Black boys, their relationship with their teacher extends beyond the classroom. Black boys use their relationships with teachers for personal growth and development. BM 19, a 38-year-old substitute teacher, shared how teachers' "check-ins" can make a substantial difference in the lives of Black boys.

Just check in. That does a whole lot. If I had a teacher who did that or an older man when I was a teenager, I would have made a world of difference. Knowing that someone is pulling you aside, asking about you, talking about basketball, or something non-academic could open the door for deeper conversations.

Participants' interviews revealed that a critical factor in developing meaningful student-educator relationships for Black boys is the presence of Black teachers.

Participant BM, a 48-year-old superintendent, shared, "For me, having a Black teacher made me feel like we came from the same world, and we had a connection. That connection mattered, and I can look back with no negative memories of her being my

teacher.” The shared experience between him and his teacher was crucial to his overall school experience.

Outside of the need for representation in school environments, some participants expressed the need for teachers to be authentic with Black boys. BM 13, a 38-year-old media company owner, declared, “Teachers need to be able to build trust with students, especially Black boys. If they don’t feel like they can trust you, they are not going to engage. It’s about being authentic, showing that you care about them as people, not just students.” He highlighted the significance of teachers showing students that while academic performance is important, who they are as a person is just as important, fostering a sense of safety in the school environment.

Similarly, BM 12, a 40-year-old assistant principal, emphasized the invaluable nature of teacher-student relationships, sharing moments where disengaged students showed interest in their education because a teacher showed that they believed in them. “The relationships teachers have with their students can make or break their school experience. I’ve seen completely disengaged students start to care about their education because one teacher believed in them and pushed them to do better.”

BM 9, a 35-year-old commercial litigator, shared that teachers who went above and beyond their traditional role made a long-term impact. “We need more conversations between teachers and students, not just about school, but life, goals, dreams, things outside of academics.” The discussions helped cultivate trust in the school environment. Another participant expressed how one of his teachers went above and beyond, often sacrificing and making herself available by skipping her lunch break. “She made herself available all the time. She would even skip her lunch to spend time with me.”

Supportive Community and Peer Influence

A recurring theme in several interviews was the crucial role that supportive communities and peer relationships played in participants' educational experiences. Several participants also emphasized the role that connected communities play in making Black boys feel secure and like they belong.

Participant B3, a 37-year-old Principal, emphasized his parents' and community's impact on his life through advocacy,

My father enrolled me in classes and encouraged me to attend certain classes that were away from a lot of distractions. I had parental support, and the community of people that I knew in my family really helped me. My family, going back to my grandmother, was from Mount Holly Township, and we had the stability of living in that community. My parents and grandparents knew people in the community, including the police chief, the town council, and the mayor. There was no transiency, and we weren't moving from place to place.

Participants also discussed how family members placed high expectations on their academic achievement. Participant B5, a 38-year-old project manager, shared the high educational expectations placed on him: "My grandfather said, 'All you have to do is go to school and get good grades. That's your job. If you don't do your job, we're going to have problems.' That stayed with me."

Some participants shared the importance of having a supportive family in their community who advocated for them and often extended their support into the education system. Participant B3, a school Principal, shared, "I know for a fact that my father going up to the school and demanding I be placed in certain classes made a difference in my trajectory. A lot of Black parents don't know they can do that, or they don't feel empowered to do that."

While some participants had active family members and community members, others shared challenges they faced due to their family's inability to balance responsibilities. Participant B6 shared, “My mother was a high school teacher. She helped me with writing a lot, but outside of that, she was hands-off. She didn’t have the time or energy as a single parent with three kids.”

The relationship with peers was a theme that emerged as critical to the success of Black boys. Participant B14, a 48- 48-year-old superintendent, spoke about the appreciation he had for the connection and camaraderie amongst his peer group.

You know, education-wise, it wasn’t just mentors, just wasn’t just teachers, but the group of people I grew up with and the kids I knew from the block. We were all trying to get through this thing and navigate the world, and we can cultivate those relationships and then bounce ideas off of them. So that was also supportive in a way that you can't manufacture. You can't teach that. It's not part of the education system.

Participant B13, a 38-year-old owner of a media production company, shared similar sentiments: “I just feel like a couple of my friends, too, helped me want to do better and succeed more.” Participant B2 spoke about negative peer influence and the relief he felt when he was able to avoid those influences by attending a school outside of the school in his neighborhood. He shared,

I believe that attending a school outside of my neighborhood helped me escape a significant amount of peer pressure. I didn’t have to perform in school because I wasn’t worried about seeing people from the block. It felt like I had two separate worlds where I could be by myself. Any drama or bullying I experienced in school didn’t follow me home to the block, and vice versa. It created a balance for me. I wasn’t the coolest kid, but I also wasn’t the kid who got bullied all the time. I was somewhere in the middle. The separation allowed me to become more of a social butterfly, which shaped how I operate today. Academically, I didn’t have to worry about being teased for trying to succeed. The constant pressure of judgment wasn’t surrounding me 24/7. And I think that really helped me focus on what I wanted to achieve.

Participant B12, who identified himself as a 40-year-old school administrator, echoed similar feelings, highlighting the value of peer relationships as a source of encouragement and accountability that impacted their success. Participant B12 shared, “Surround yourself with like-minded people, people who want to see you succeed and are willing to push you when needed. At each stage in life, whether it’s elementary school, high school, or professionally, make sure you have a support system in place.”

School involvement in the community was highlighted as an essential component for Black boys. Integrating the community's values and resources into the school community was seen as necessary. Participant B15, a 44-year-old assistant principal, shared,

The community needs to be involved in the school. When isolating schools from the community, you’re removing a considerable part of a student’s identity and support network. Involving parents, local leaders, and mentors—people who understand what these students are going through—is how you build a school that works for everyone.

RQ #2: What Would Black Males/Men Who Are Now Leading Productive Lives Like to Tell Educational Leaders About How to Support All Students?

Practical Life Skills

Many participants emphasized the impact of the lack of real-world teaching and preparation they did not receive during their time in school. Several participants emphasized a deep desire for schools to teach practical life lessons centered around real-world education, preparing students for life beyond the classroom. Participants felt that this education gap left them feeling unprepared and uncertain about navigating the complexities of adulthood.

Participant B1, a 37-year-old Amazon delivery driver, shared his feelings of being unprepared for adulthood due to his limited exposure to essential life concepts, such as

credit, investing, and owning property. “I just wish they would teach and talk about how to navigate life a little more, versus just the, you know, the regular old math, English, science, history, or whatever. Just more about life, you know? Business: the importance of credit. Things like that.”

Participant B5, a 37-year-old project manager, shared similar attitudes about educators teaching more practical life skills,

Yes, you attend school and earn good grades. We talked about how that's important because it builds a structure. It builds a discipline that allows you to be on or show that you're on the level with other people around you or higher. But what about telling people how to do taxes, teaching people how to invest, teaching people? Why it's important to own property. Why, you can start a business.

Participant B10 further emphasized the need for schools to teach entrepreneurial skills as a component of life skills for Black boys, providing them with future self-sufficiency beyond learning to work for someone else. Participants acknowledged entrepreneurship as a conduit to empowerment. Participant B10 shared,

They should integrate entrepreneurship. In high school, they didn't necessarily teach you how to be an entrepreneur in business class. They taught you how to work in a business. We need groups and teams of Black boys who learn their history, understand how to create a business, build literacy and math skills, and get exposure to the next level, which is college.

Participant B18, a 53-year-old entrepreneur from Chicago, echoed similar thoughts concerning Black boys and the importance of learning how to become entrepreneurs and garner financial acuity for self-sustainability. he shared,

Every Black man should learn how to start a business. Every Black man should be an investor. You must be prepared to build your own. If a man wants to be a king, a Black man wants to be a king; he has to learn how to build a castle.

Participants championed the idea of entrepreneurship, but another theme that emerged was participants' desire for more experiential and hands-on learning. Participant B1 shared,

I feel like there needs to be more interaction, trade programs, and stuff. I feel like a lot more of that should be implemented in the school, just because I feel like some of that stuff is more hands-on. And you know, kids are a little bit more into that than, you know, sitting in front of a teacher and learning.

Several participants expressed that experiential learning is a more effective way to foster engagement among Black boys than traditional teaching methods, such as passive or lecturer-style instruction. Participant B11, a 51-year-old state attorney in New Jersey, articulated this by sharing,

I would love for us to be able to incorporate different modalities of teaching with our kids. I think our kids would do better with experiential learning than sitting down behind a desk and just listening to somebody and reading a book. I think our kids need hands-on learning. I think our minds—my mind included—work better with hands-on learning. The square root of something, the radius, and pi—I don't even know what pi is. If it's not a pie I can eat, I'm not trying to hear it.

Participant B19, a 38-year-old substitute teacher, added a layer of perspective to the idea of more experiential learning for Black boys. He spoke about the concept of a holistic approach when educating Black boys. He said, "If I had a son, I would want him to go to a school that has balance. They do some teaching, but there's also some physical education, mindfulness, and experiential learning like yoga or karate."

Participants also signified extracurricular activities as a source of experiential and hands-on learning that impacted their personal growth and contributed to their success. Participant B4, who described himself as a 38-year-old financial advisor, shared his thoughts on the lessons learned through his extracurricular activities, which were just as valuable to his journey as the academics.

He shared,

The lessons for me in school weren't necessarily academic. I played football, and my most outstanding educational experience was through extracurricular

activities, such as social events. I believe that football taught me many valuable social skills, including overcoming adversity, being competitive, and working effectively as part of a team. I believe the ancillary aspects of school and academics likely provided me with a more comprehensive education than the specific subjects.

Culturally Relevant Education

Many participants stressed the significance of Black boys seeing someone who looks like them in their educational environment. Participants expressed a sense of belonging, hope, and motivation fostered by seeing Black teachers and other Black role models in an educational setting. For some participants, having the experience of a Black educator provided a sense of authenticity and relatability in the classroom.

Participant B7, who described himself as a 27-year-old United States Postal Service employee, explained,

I just feel like it's essential for us to see someone who looks like us, you know, that's teaching us. It feels a little weird if your teachers are always, you know, a white lady or a white guy. Why are there not any teachers who look like me teaching? I probably would have looked at my education a little bit differently as well if my teacher looked a little different.

Another participant, B16, shared, "When I had Black teachers or saw Black principals, maybe I didn't realize the impact then, but looking back, that was crucial. It made me think, 'Okay, education isn't too bad,' because I saw someone who looked like me in that role. It shows that representation in schools plays a big part in the mindset of Black students."

Participants also highlighted the significant influence of Black educators on their growth and development. Participant BM 3, a 37-year-old school principal, shared, "What pulled me into wanting to be successful, wanting to be a teacher, was the time I spent as a teacher assistant for my first Black teacher ever. I never had a Black male

teacher in elementary or middle school.” Participant BM 5 expressed deep gratitude for the Black male teachers he encountered during his school years, as they significantly shaped his perception of success. He shared, “Many times, my gym teacher was a Black man. I always had a lot of respect for them. Until this day, if I see some of them, I walk up to them and hug them and tell them how much I appreciate them.”

BM 5 shared a nuanced perspective. While he recognized the importance of Black educators in the school environment, he expressed that it was not a necessity for him, “People talk a lot about representation, and there’s a place for it, don’t get me wrong. But I didn’t need to see Black men around me all the time to feel like I was special; however, when you see Black men doing well, that makes an even bigger difference.”

Participants also expressed frustration with the curriculum during their educational stint. Participants labeled Eurocentric curricula as never drawing them in and failing to connect to their lived experiences. Participants emphasized their desire for more culturally relevant content. Participant BM 15 said,

If the curriculum doesn’t speak to their lived experiences, how do we expect Black male students to engage? We need more culturally relevant content. These students need to see themselves in the material, in the stories, in the history we teach. It’s not about lowering the bar; it’s about making the content resonate with them.

Similarly, participant BM13 remarked, “Black boys benefit from academic rigor that is connected to something a bit more lifestyle-related that develops character. I am not saying it has to be super dry, but it is more than just academics. It’s about asking, ‘Who are you as a man?’ We gotta talk about man shit.”

BM 12 stressed the importance of teachers employing strategies that engage Black boys in learning, in addition to culturally relevant content. BM 12 shared,

The Socratic method, which involved open discussions and debates, proved to be the most effective learning environment for me. It allowed me to engage with material, think critically, and feel like my voice mattered. More students, especially Black boys, need that kind of interactive, discussion-based learning.

Participant BM 4 echoed similar sentiments, promoting content that aligns with Black cultural identities, thereby rendering learning more meaningful to Black boys. Participant BM4 shared,

One of my most impactful teachers was Mr. Stansberry, my high school English teacher. He introduced us to Black history figures like Marcus Garvey and Assata Shakur, things that weren't part of the standard curriculum. I remember learning for the sake of learning in his class. That experience was powerful.

Importance of Black Educators and Mentors

A recurring theme emerged throughout the participant interviews: the importance of Black male educators and their role as mentors. Several participants reported that Black male figures in their school environment, such as coaches, teachers, and mentors, had a significant impact, offering familiarity and guidance that was relatable due to their shared culture.

Participant BM 6, a 34-year-old Traffic control technician from Philadelphia, shared the vital influence of his high school football coach, a teacher in his school, "Coach Jenkins, my football coach, was my first Black male teacher. He was a role model for me, and seeing a Black man in that role made me want to be a teacher myself." Coaches were viewed by several participants as not just teachers but as father figures, often providing much-needed guidance. BM 12 remarked, "Mr. Cummings, my football coach, was not just a coach. He could rough you up in a way that felt like a big brother. It wasn't out of anger but out of love and care. He showed me how to navigate relationships in school and outside, which helped me a lot." Another participant, BM 16, shared that

his experience with Black male role models in the school setting played an essential role in building his confidence and identity as a Black boy: "Having a Black male teacher allowed me to be my authentic self. It gave me space to talk and act in ways that felt natural to me. I didn't have to change who I was or how I expressed myself."

Several participants emphasized the critical role of mentorship in helping them stay focused on their goals. Participant BM 16, a 38-year-old Director of the Educational Opportunity Fund at a community college in New Jersey, expressed, "Mentorship is pivotal...for Black men, it can make or break someone's potential outcomes. Mentorship is key because it gives students someone to look up to, especially if they don't have that positive male role model at home."

For some participants, the role of mentorship extended beyond academics to encompass personal development. BM 13 shared how the lack of mentorship in the school setting impacted him: "If I had a mentor who took the time to understand me, I think I would have been more receptive to what they had to offer." BM 18, a 53-year-old entrepreneur from Chicago, further illustrated the power of mentorship and how it pushed him to academic success: "I had two Black male professors. I met one, and both of them were the only Black males to get tenure in the entire business school at their respective universities. They were both instrumental in my getting my PhD. If I had not met either of those men, I would not be a doctor today."

Many participants experienced a male authority figure in the educational environment, which provided structure and discipline. Still, they were not receiving it at home due to the absence of a male figure in the household. Participant BM6 shared that the authoritative male figure is significant, and since I didn't grow up with my father,

having those male teachers provide that authoritative presence at the time was something I needed, looking back. Still, I didn't know how to receive it."

Other participants shared similar feelings, expressing the need and understanding that Black boys need "tough love" along their educational journey: "You need that tough love put-up-or-shut-up environment, especially as Black men, right? You need to be in an environment where you're being led, and you have somebody that you have to answer to." In contrast to participants who benefited from mentorship, some illustrated challenges they faced due to its nonexistence. Participant BM19, who described himself as a 38-year-old substitute teacher in New Jersey, reflected,

I remember being one of three boys in a majority-female class, and halfway through, we discussed adjectives and the heavy flow of conversation. It was unusual, but I appreciated that the girls felt comfortable with a teacher of the same gender and race. I didn't have my Black male teacher who could talk to me about man things, puberty, girls, and stuff like that.

Another participant, BM 16, shared how the absence of mentorship negatively contributed to adverse outcomes academically and socially: "Some of my peers were labeled troublemakers early on, and that expectation stayed with them. They didn't have anyone advocating for them."

Teacher Expectations And Supportive Environments

The topic of teacher expectations and their impact on the academic success of Black male students was an emerging theme. Several participants stated that when teachers held students to high expectations, they were more likely to rise to those expectations. On the contrary, teachers who held and imposed low expectations for students often internally processed those limitations, which fostered diminished academic performance.

Participant BM 3, a 37-year-old School principal in New Jersey, expressed the necessity of teachers to create environments where the expectation is for students to succeed, saying, “Kids need structure and need to be in environments where they can academically thrive. You can’t have low expectations for kids. If you put kids in an environment where they can be successful, they will thrive.” Participant BM 5 echoed similar sentiments regarding assumptions about Black students’ ability to achieve because they are Black. He remarked, “Looking at a kid and saying he’s Black, so I don’t think he’s going to be that successful, is ridiculous to me. That’s the worst form of racism. There is a bar, and if you’re not here, you’re not doing it right. This is the bar, and this is not good enough. I need it here.” BM 12 further supported the direct link between expectations and student success by stating, “When you have positive expectations for Black boys, we will rise to them. If teachers continue to set low expectations, students will meet those low expectations.”

Other participants, beyond academic expectations, emphasized the value of teachers who take the time to develop caring and supportive relationships with their students. BM 6 shared:

Rules without a relationship lead to rebellion. The teacher didn’t have a relationship. The approach was more of an authority perspective, not caring about who I was, what I was experiencing, or what I was going through. Everything was about how I was doing in your classroom, so now I don’t feel safe listening to you. I see you as a threat.

Some participants perceived that students today are more sensitive when it comes to determining whether teachers are authentically invested in their success. “I think students, probably even more so now than when I was going to school, are much more tuned to whether or not a teacher is vested in the process or them.” Participant BM 15, a

44- 44-year-old principal, emphasized further the need for teachers to listen to their students to build an environment of trust and make students feel supported: “Teachers need to listen to their students. Don’t silence them or punish them. Kids will tell you what they need if you listen to understand and not just to respond. If you can’t get a kid's heart, you can’t get their mind.”

Empathetic Educators

Several participants stressed the vital role of empathetic teacher-student relationships, which provided a sense of love, care, and concern for their well-being.

Several participants expressed that those teachers who showed a personal interest in their lives left lasting imprints.

Participant BM 18 shared how his experience with caring educators influenced his school experience.

Love, just love, because in hindsight, when I look back on it, I realized that a lot of what I was dealing with emotionally just came from feeling very unloved by anybody. Including my parents, who loved me, but they were too busy to express that. So, what I noticed was that whenever someone took an interest in me and took the time to explain, they would say, 'Here's how you do a math problem; here's how you do the homework.' I never forgot that.

Participant BM 19 shared similar sentiments, defining the optimal educational environment for Black boys as one that does not just encompass academics but fosters a sense of camaraderie: "The ideal educational environment for Black males is probably one that is heavily rooted in education but also a sense of camaraderie. Because Black men in most environments outside of athletics and prison, to the pipeline, every other environment you put a Black person in, they're going to be one of the few or one of one."

BM 6 described the importance of teachers meeting students where they are by acknowledging their lived experiences rather than leaning on rigid discipline. BM 6 explained,

Rules without a relationship lead to rebellion. And this teacher didn't have a relationship. He was establishing rules, and I'm like, who are you? Now I am feeling like I don't have a choice, and I don't know you like that. Going into your classroom, I don't feel safe. I see you as a threat, and you're correcting me as an attack.

BM 19 believed that Black boys being acknowledged by an adult figure, preferably a male, could make a difference for Black boys.

Check-in. That does a whole lot. You know, obviously, treat them like a student, give them homework, give them assignments. Every now and then, pull them to the side because you really don't know what a young man is going through.

Participant BM 14 reflected on the lasting impact of having a Black teacher, which made him feel more connected to the subject matter. "I remember being on the monkey bars at recess, and my teacher, who was Black, talked with me about it. There weren't many Black kids in my class, but I remember having that conversation with her. It made me feel like we had a connection, and I can look back, I don't have any negative memories of her being my teacher."

A solid subtheme that emerged from participant responses was the importance of building trust between teachers and students. Several participants emphasized that Black male students can discern whether a teacher genuinely cares for them or is merely going through the motions. Participant BM13 expressed,

Teachers need to be able to build trust with students, especially Black boys. If they don't feel like they can trust you, they're not going to engage. It's about being authentic and showing that you care about them as individuals, not just as students.

BM 12 further explained how student and teacher relationships can be vital in deciding whether students remain engaged in school or thoroughly check out: “The relationships students have with their teachers can make or break their school experience. I’ve seen completely disengaged students start to care about their education because one teacher believed in them and pushed them to do better.” One participant emphasized the importance of teachers listening to their students as a key element in building supportive relationships. BM 2, a 42-year-old community economic developer in Philadelphia, shared,

If teachers and leaders just listened to their students, really listened to understand instead of responding, they’d see that students are telling them what they need. Too often, we’re silenced or punished instead of being heard, and that’s a big problem, especially for Black boys.

Some participants emphasized the importance of conversations beyond classroom subjects, extending beyond classroom instruction, and focusing on the lives and student aspirations, which was critical in fostering connections and trust among students and teachers. BM 9, a 35-year-old commercial litigator from Philadelphia, expressed this sentiment: “I think we need more conversations between teachers and students. Not just about school, but life, goals, dreams, and things outside of academics. Those conversations build trust.”

The nurturing role of teachers also emerged as a central factor in promoting student success. BM 10 reflected a moment representative of a caring teacher: “She made herself available all the time. She came outside during her lunch break to talk to me.” BM 10 also shared the power of an emotionally supportive teacher, “I remember she just. I felt that maternal support that I needed, right? And it was powerful coming from a Black woman.”

In addition, teachers support students emotionally to build trust; some participants spoke about moments where teachers encouraged them to try new things and step out of their comfort zone to pursue new opportunities. BM 15 shared,

My coach and my social studies teacher were in seventh grade. First day of seventh grade, he was like, “See you on the football field.” I never played a day in my life. I got the directive. So I was there. And then he said, “Football season is over. See you at wrestling practice.” I never wrestled a day in my life. Where was I? Wrestling practice. Why? Because he was my teacher. I respected him.

RQ3: What Do Black Men Who Are Now Leading Productive Lives Think Are The Factors That Are Affecting The Achievement Level Of All Students, Especially Black Males?

Systemic Barriers

Participant interviews highlighted several systemic barriers that have generally and currently impacted the outcomes and educational experiences of all students, especially Black males. Several themes emerged from participant interviews. One of the themes that emerged is the systemic disruption and breakdown of the Black family structure.

Participant BM 15, a 44-year-old assistant principal, highlighted the intentional undoing of the Black family structure and its systemic impact on student achievement. He shared, “They did a good job of doing that. Very successful at breaking up homes. So now on our rebuild, the question is, how do we recover from that destruction?”

Several participants shared their experiences with students being tracked as a systemic barrier to their academic progress. Participants expressed the disproportionate placement of Black students in lower-level classes, limiting their future academic opportunities. Participant BM 3, a 37-year-old principal, expressed:

There are a lot of barriers that stop Black and brown kids from getting that opportunity to be in certain classes. Right? Like you know, we have this tracking method in a lot our public schools and a lot of suburban schools that hinder Black and brown kids from being in certain classes because they don't have specific test scores or they don't have this teacher recommendation, or they don't have this prerequisite and what that does is that it hinders them. It prevents them from having a chance to succeed, possibly in the future.

BM 12, a 40-year-old assistant principal, expressed similar concerns, reflecting on his own experience.

The whole tracking thing impacted me, not overall in the end, but it did affect me as I was growing up, not just me, but other kids as well. I think about all the kids I grew up with and how incredibly smart those kids were, and unfortunately, even though we had a lot of talented Brothas, a lot of them were tracked and not nurtured. They didn't get the opportunities to succeed because their type of intelligence was not valued in the traditional setting.

Another systemic barrier that emerged during participant interviews was the inequitable disciplinary practices of teachers and their expectations. BM 16, a 38-year-old director of the Educational Opportunity Fund at a community college in New Jersey, expressed how he was treated as a "problem" child rather than a student with the potential to achieve greatly.

Teachers were quick to yell at me, didn't seem too interested in trying to help me, and generally treated me like a problem. I wasn't a straightforward child. I certainly had a mouth on me, but the teachers treated us differently from the white kids. The white kids were doing exactly what the Black kids were doing, but they were held to a certain standard. There was a level of patience and understanding we didn't receive. Many participants outside of the disciplinary disparities addressed the inequalities in specific policies, such as school zoning. Participant BM 3 expressed:

There are systemic issues. I'll give you an example: the zoning of schools. Luckily, I was zoned on the wealthier side of my town, and the school I went to was a more high-achieving school compared to the other schools across town. It helped me, but it hindered the other kids who went to school across town.

Participants emphasized the scarcity of Black male educators in the school system and highlighted how the presence of Black male teachers could help balance the inequities within the system.

Disconnect Between Curriculum And Real-World Preparation

A recurring theme stressed among participants was the disconnect felt between their K-12 education and the real world of post-high school and adulthood. Several participants performed well in high school but later realized that the academic knowledge they acquired was insufficient to meet the demands of higher education, as they also lacked real-world experience, particularly in areas such as financial literacy, business skills, and overall personal development.

Participants expressed that their experience with curriculum disconnect was due to the disparity between high school and college preparation, particularly in terms of academic expectations at the college level. Several participants recounted their early academic success and how it created a false sense of confidence. Participants expressed that, as a result of the false sense of confidence they experienced upon entering college, they encountered glaring gaps. Participant BM 10, a 39-year-old K-8 principal, reflected on his experience,

I was at the top of my class in high school. I graduated, and there were 214 graduates. I was number four. So I was in the top 2 percent of the graduating class, and I was able to go to Dartmouth, which is an Ivy League school. When I arrived, I realized there were significant gaps in my reading and writing skills compared to the rest of the population, despite being a top student at my high school. I think knowing your writing is globally competitive is essential for the

Black male experience. The curriculum often isn't designed in a way that prepares us to compete at the highest levels.

Participant BM 4, a 38-year-old financial advisor, shared similar sentiments about not feeling prepared for high school, but noted that overcoming those challenges had cultivated resilience. "I wasn't academically prepared for college from my public high school. I struggled, but that experience of coming from a place where I wasn't prepared and overcoming those challenges taught me resilience."

Other participants, beyond academic shortcomings, expressed disappointment that during their K-12 education, they were not taught crucial life skills, which made the transition from high school into adulthood challenging. Participant BM 15, a 44-year-old assistant principal, remarked, "Schools don't prepare you for real life, especially if you're a Black male. We must teach financial literacy, mental health awareness, and communication skills. Essential items for navigating the world. It's not just about test scores. It's about life skills."

Several participants shared how racially biased educators and low expectations played a part in their lack of preparation. Participants expressed that the lack of challenge by the system towards Black males academically leads many to failure. Participant BM 6, a 34-year-old traffic control technician, reflected,

The worst form of racism is looking at a kid and thinking, "Oh, he's Black, so I don't think he's going to be successful." This is ridiculous. The system feeds into this with Individual Educational Plans, and I don't care about that stuff. If you're reading level isn't where it needs to be, you need to work harder. That's just the reality.

Another participant added to this and expressed how Black boys are oftentimes placed in lower-level classes instead of being supported in the way they need. BM, an 18-year-old entrepreneur, remarked,

One of the flaws with the system is that it seems there is an effort to teach you how to be their definition of what a successful Black person is. ‘This Black boy is not behaving in a way that I, as a white female, can identify with, so let’s get him on some medication, let’s get him in some special classes.

Along with the mischaracterization academically of Black boys, some participants expressed the disconnect from curriculum and relevance shows itself in not only academic unpreparedness, but participants also expressed frustration with the lack of preparation with knowledge of the real world throughout their high school education. Participants shared that too much of their schooling experience was centered around how well they could score on a standardized test, causing teachers to miss opportunities to teach essential life skills.

Participant BM 1, a 37-year-old Amazon delivery driver, shared, “They don’t really prepare you for life after school or about business and the importance of credit. I feel like we should have learned differently from what we did. I feel they didn’t prepare us for the world, you know, for life after school.” Another participant echoed a similar sentiment, contending that schools overlook vital aspects of adulthood. BM 11, a 51-year-old state attorney, remarked, “There’s a secular world that is missed in K through 12. It’s just missed. What about telling people how to do taxes, how to invest, and why it’s important to own property?”

Another participant, BM 15, a 44-year-old assistant principal, emphasized the significance of incorporating life skills into the schooling experience, stating.

Schools don’t prepare you for real life, especially if you’re a Black male. We need to teach things like financial literacy, mental health awareness, and communication skills, stuff you need to navigate the real world. It’s not just about test scores. It’s about life skills.

Some participants expressed that they could navigate these challenges through personal resilience, acknowledging that success came not as a result of the educational system, but despite it. BM 5, a 37-year-old project manager for assessments, shared, “I became everything that I am, a Black man in America who has a master’s degree, who has a house, who has a wife, who has a kid. I became this because of what I learned back then.”

Unsupportive Educational Environment

Participants shared their experiences, which highlighted the severe impact of an unsupportive educational environment on Black male students. The narratives of participants reveal how several factors shaped their academic pathway. Several participants shared moments of support that had a profound impact on their lives, but they also described feeling unseen, unfairly disciplined, and deprived of a proper education.

One of the emerging themes from participant interviews was the practice of academic tracking. Students were placed in lower-level courses based on their early assessment results, rather than their potential. Participant BM 12, a 40-year-old assistant principal, reflected on being placed in lower-level classes, which restricted his opportunities for future educational growth. He shared,

I had some limitations, you know, like my reading comprehension wasn’t as high as it should be, but again, all that was warranted was just a little more of a different approach. Right? So, the negative experience of being tracked in low-level classes, not being truly challenged, or even being pushed ahead.

Similarly, BM 7, a 26-year-old postal worker, shared how standardized test scores determine access to quality education for students, disproportionately impacting those from underserved communities.

Test scores played a significant role in it. But, you know, test scores go along with reading. If you don't read well, which most schools in impoverished communities don't, you don't have a true opportunity.

Several participants reflected on experiences where educators viewed them with bias, labeling them as disruptive and unworthy of support. This experience led participants to feel excluded from positive school experiences. BM 19, a 38-year-old substitute teacher, reflected on a moment in fourth grade when a teacher found him “intimidating,” leading to avoidance from the teacher helping him. He remarked,

I remember asking for help. She was very reluctant to be in my presence or to come to support me. I wasn't seen. I also remember there being a conversation, and this was when I was initially identified as having ADHD. The teacher wanted to put me on medication, and my mother had to fight not to let that happen. Just as a young Black boy in that moment, I felt I wasn't being seen.

Bias for some participants did not only come from white teachers, but Black educators also held biased beliefs. Participant BM 1, a 38-year-old Amazon delivery driver, shared a moment when a Black female teacher told him he was going to fall victim to the justice system. “I had an art teacher in 5th grade. I'll never forget it. A Black woman, a *sista* with dreadlocks. I remember her telling me I was going to jail. That's not something you say to a child, let alone a Black boy, where that's already the message being told to us by society.”

Participants also described feeling unfairly disciplined in comparison to their white counterparts. Participant BM 14, a 48-year-old superintendent, reflects on his school experience, noting that when he did nothing wrong, the teacher would place his desk in the hallway before school began. He shared,

I tell everybody, like during my 5th and 6th grade school years, that was back in the day when you could put a desk in the hallway. You know you want to change someone's seat, but it could have been out in the hallway. I would get in trouble with other kids, and you know, they may get like, Hey, move over here, and it'll

be my seat that gets transferred. I would have to start the day with my seat in the hallway.

BM 14 also reflected on a moment in 3rd grade when he was accused of something he did not do, leading to punishment from his parents and at school, despite it being proven later that it wasn't him. This incident further cultivated feelings of alienation, disconnection, and academic disengagement. He shared,

I remember sitting next to a girl who made this paper fortune teller with a bunch of curse words on it. The teacher discovered it and automatically assumed it was mine. I said it wasn't mine, but the teacher had me call my parents and them about it, and my parents, being "old school," believed the teacher's words. I remember getting in trouble in school and at home. I remember being so mad. I recall that it was revealed it wasn't mine, and there was no apology. Instead, it was, "Oh, it wasn't you this time, but next time it will probably be."

Participants further expressed that the lack of accountability for teachers created a chasm of distrust between students and educators. Participant BM 6, a 34-year-old traffic control technician, shared that discipline was prioritized over building relationships with students, particularly with male teachers. He expressed, "With my female teachers, it was different. There was more nurture. More patience. It didn't feel like they were trying to check me. It felt like they wanted to help me. I wasn't fighting them like I fought the male teacher."

While many participants' experiences highlight barriers to achievement and success, participants also emphasized that education could be advanced to offer better support for Black male students. BM 12, a 40-year-old assistant principal, shared that at some rare points along his educational journey, more Black students received encouragement than he did; academic outcomes could have been different. He expressed, "Imagine if every single one of our kids had that Miss S. moment? We would be

flourishing. But there wouldn't be this big discrepancy that there is right now, due to, obviously, not because of us, but because of barriers and systems that were put in place.”

Social And Cultural Influences on Black Male Achievement

For Black males maneuvering the educational landscape, their academic experiences and outcomes are affected by social and cultural influences. The participants in this study, who are now leading productive lives, acknowledged that various factors, including long-held views about education passed down through generations, systemic issues, and access to or lack of mentorship, significantly impact their achievements. One of the emerging themes among participant interviews is the lack of value placed on education and the generational push of this message in Black households. Several participants shared that in numerous Black families, education is not prioritized as the first choice to work toward a better life. Participant BM 9, a 34-year-old commercial litigator, reflected, sharing,

Even though I went to predominantly white schools, they were always public schools. Being in a public school and being around people from all different socioeconomic backgrounds helped keep me grounded. But I do think that, for a lot of Black students, there isn't always this long-standing generational push towards education.

This lack of encouragement, academically and generationally, often impacts Black students' educational pathways, especially toward college, as opposed to their white counterparts, who may have more well-defined guidance. Participant BM 6, a 34-year-old traffic control technician, remarked,

If you grew up in a house where one's really talking about college, you don't really think about it like that. Like, yeah, we knew college was out there, but it wasn't this major push like I know some kids had.

Some participants reported that, although there was some educational support, survival was the primary focus for families. Participant BM 1, a 37-year-old Amazon delivery driver, reflected by sharing,

My mom did the best she could, but she was working, trying to make sure we were good at home. So yeah, she helped with homework when she could, but school wasn't the number one thing she was pushing. It was more about survival.

Black families placing short-term needs over long-term educational pathways and planning create further disadvantages for Black males. The detriment is ever more present when Black males do not have access to some form of a role model to promote further the magnitude of achieving academically. Another theme that emerged as a critical factor for Black male student success was mentorship. Several participants highlighted the life-changing impact of mentors who work twofold by providing guidance and molding Black boys for success. Participant BM 9 details the impact mentorship played in his career,

I have a Black mentor at my law firm, and she is great. She goes above and beyond. Just having someone who looks like me and is successful, it's huge. It shows me what is possible. It removes excuses. It's like, 'Okay, she did it. What am I saying to myself that's holding me back?'

BM 11 echoed similar sentiments with his K-12 experience, emphasizing the importance for teachers to understand the challenges that Black students encounter, stating, "We need more Black male teachers, but the right kind. Not just ones who come in strict and tough, but ones who understand what we're up against." BM 9 shares the importance of experiencing a Black teacher during his K-12 years, sharing,

My first Black teacher was in 7th grade, Ms. Grimes. I remember one time she pulled me aside and said, "People are going to assume things about you just because of the color of your skin. It's not fair, but you need to be aware of it."

Black male students often require moments of intervention from Black educators, who guide them in navigating the expectations placed upon them. Participants expressed that being labeled and stereotyped molds their self-perception and impacts how they view themselves through an academic lens. BM 7, a 26-year-old United States Postal Service worker, reflected on how the expectation that he fit in and conform to certain social expectations affected his educational engagement.

Once I was in middle school, I mostly hung around my Black friends. I just wanted to be cool. Suddenly, coolness became a thing I was aspiring to be, and it had nothing to do with school. Being smart wasn't cool. Getting good grades wasn't cool. Not caring was cool.

In his reflection, BM 9 describes the tension between academic achievement and wanting to be accepted. He shared, "It's like for Black boys; you're either a baller, a rapper, or a problem. If you don't fit into one of those, people don't know where to put you."

BM 10 detailed similar sentiments, speaking on how Black boys being labeled early in school substantially shaped their academic paths. BM 10 remarked, "I think a lot of Black boys are set up to fail before they even start. You get labeled in first or second grade, and after that, you're always the 'bad kid' or the 'slow learner.' Improvement doesn't even matter when you get that label; it just sticks."

Participants also revealed the challenges of achieving academic success and gaining social acceptance within the Black community. BM 13, a 38-year-old owner of a media production company, reflected on how excelling academically in a predominantly Black environment came with being labeled a "nerd." He reflected,

I think playing basketball and being a top student. Because of being smart in the Black community, they might consider you a nerd. You talk white, or you're acting white because you're a nerd. After all, they don't really celebrate it. But

when you're a basketball player, you are celebrated, and the culture celebrates it because people come to see the games and talk about them. They are fans. Being a nerd and a basketball player allowed me to see that people won't like you just because you're smart. It really comes down to being able to connect with them.

His reflection highlighted the ways in which excelling academically can cause skepticism or feelings of isolation because being smart or achieving academically is not always valued culturally in comparison to athletics. However, the participant emphasized that his athletic ability provided those around him with something to relate to, which granted him social acceptance that might not have been available through academic success alone.

Beyond peer expectations, some participants shared that the way educators perceive Black students affects the trajectory of their education. BM 9 recounts an occurrence with his fourth-grade teacher that awakened him to the existence of racial bias:

I repeated something I heard another kid say about sex. I didn't even fully understand what it meant. But when I said it, I got in trouble, and the teacher came down hard on me. I could tell she was judging me, like, 'These parents nowadays, these kids, they don't know how to raise their children.' And I realized later it wasn't just about what I said. It was about me being Black.

Participant reflections from Black men who have gone on to lead productive lives highlight the profound impact that social and cultural influences have on their educational achievement. Families' historical attitudes toward education, systemic barriers, racial labeling, and access to mentorship can determine the trajectories of Black male students in empowering ways. BM 4, a 38-year-old financial advisor, states,

The cliff is highly steep for Black boys. If we don't get through this educational system, it's a free fall. That's why even if my son isn't the best student, I tell him, 'You have to finish. You don't want to be a Black man in America without options.'

Relation To Theoretical Framework

The multiple ethical paradigms frame was utilized in this study because there is a widespread agreement that school leaders face multiple decisions daily that have ethical aspects. Scholars are concerned, however, that principals often resolve dilemmas in their work, with little or no conscious consideration of ethics (Berkovich & Eyal, 2020). Each administrative decision entails a restructuring of human life; that is why administration, at its core, is the resolution of moral dilemmas (Yee & Yee, 2024).

Researchers continue to examine the experiences of Black boys to gain a deeper understanding of their persistent underachievement and backward progression in the educational arena. However, they often arrive at similar findings: young Black men are recurrently linked to low academic achievement, elevated high school dropout rates, high poverty, unemployment, and mass incarceration (Hawkins-Jones et al., 2024).

The paradigm of justice ensures equity and fairness in education. Leaders operate from this paradigm to cultivate environments that uphold equity for all students by advocating for students' rights, ensuring they do not fall victim to existing unfair systemic institutions. Throughout this study, justice was exemplified through the examples of participants' families fighting and advocating for their children to be placed in more rigorous and challenging academic environments, as well as to avoid distractions or existing inequities that may hinder the students' success. Family engagement for Black boys has proven to be a crucial factor in combating existing inequities, providing educational leaders with the knowledge that it is necessary to support and encourage parents to advocate for their students, especially Black students. When participants reported a lack of parental engagement and support, they felt isolated and unsupported.

The paradigm of critique encourages school leaders to challenge the systemic inequities that hinder students' success. Policies such as tracking, teaching with a deficit-based mindset, and low academic expectations disproportionately affect Black students. Black men in this study detailed how teachers with low expectations and other barriers, such as tracking and lack of access to rigorous coursework, impact their education. The existence of these barriers requires educators to question deep-rooted inequitable practices while also understanding the broader implications these practices create for not only Black students but also other marginalized communities. Educational leaders must find ways to improve equitable outcomes for all students.

The ethic of care prioritizes students' well-being. It demands that school leaders support students beyond the scope of academics and provide a more nurturing approach to addressing needs that extend beyond academics. Caring relationships between students and educators contributed to fostering the sense that students belong, which motivated them to put forth greater academic effort. The ethic of care had a profound impact due to the compassion, encouragement, and overall genuineness of concern that teachers and other educators showed, which positively influenced their academic effort and overall growth as students.

The profession's paradigm requires school leaders to adhere to their ethical principles and responsibilities, prioritizing the success of their students. When leaders operate within this paradigm, they must hold all students to high expectations while fostering an inclusive and empowering school environment for everyone. In this study, when teachers demonstrated their belief in students' abilities and maintained high standards, it built confidence in the students, often pushing them to meet those

expectations. Conversely, when participants shared their experiences of low expectations from teachers due to racial bias, it imposed limitations on them and diminished their motivation. Educators who fail to act with professional integrity abandon their ethical responsibilities, ultimately harming students' self-concept and their educational journey. See Table 4.2 for further details.

Table 4.2

Excerpts Supporting Multiple Ethical Paradigm

Ethical Paradigm	Excerpts
Justice	BM 3- "As I got older and moved into middle school, my father played a significant role in shaping my education. He made sure I was placed in classes that minimized distractions and kept me away from environments that might have held me back. All of that helped me reach my potential."
Justice	BM 19- "My mom's a retired math teacher. She was very adamant that, no matter where we lived, I was going to get a good education. She was gonna be on the teacher's ass, which I respected and appreciated because you have to advocate for your child."
Justice	BM 18- "Some of the stress at home came from parents that just didn't even really understand what I was feeling, to then going into a place, the school, where I didn't know, man, I'd be lost. I wanted to do good every year, but I didn't know what to do."
Critique	BM- 16 "If you're a teacher, you're a weapon of mass destruction when you have low expectations for students. In 25 years of service, you can do a lot of damage with negative expectations."
Critique	BM 19- "Negative teacher expectations hold students back. If you come in thinking Black kids can't achieve the same as white kids, you're going to treat them differently, and that's not fair to anyone."
Critique	BM 10- "There are a lot of barriers that stop Black and Brown kids from getting the opportunity to be in certain classes. Right? We have this tracking method in a lot of public schools, and what that does is hinder them. It stops an opportunity for them to be successful."

Table 4.2 (continued)

Ethical Paradigm	Excerpts
Care	BM 12- “Every student needs a champion who believes in and motivates them. I had Ms. Smith, and I try to be that mentor for the students I teach.”
Care	BM 6- “Rules without relationship lead to rebellion. That teacher and I didn’t have a relationship. The approach was more of an authority, not caring about who I was, what I was experiencing, and what I was going through.”
Care	BM 19- “Just check in. That does a whole lot. If I had a teacher do that or an older man when I was a teenager, it would have made a world of difference.”
Profession	BM 12- “My teacher pulled me on the rug, and said, ‘I’m going to call you on this. You’re too smart to be acting foolish for no reason. Miss M. pulled me to the line and said, ‘Hey, look. This is what I expect from you. I expect nothing less, and I know you can do more than what you are doing.’”
Profession	BM 8- “My math teacher, the one thing she said: ‘I’m holding you accountable because this is the expectation. No, no, this is what you’re going to do, period.’”
Profession	BM 5- “Looking at a kid and saying he’s Black, so I don’t think he’s going to be that successful, is ridiculous to me. That is the worst form of racism. There is a bar, and if you’re not here, you’re not doing it right.”

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Efforts to support Black male achievement have received focus for more than half a century. The available literature does not adequately reflect the experiences of Black males who have successfully navigated the K-12 educational system and achieved success. The majority of the current literature focuses on the shortcomings and disparities in Black male achievement, unjust disciplinary practices, and inequitable opportunities afforded to them. However, there are too few studies that have shed light on those Black males who have succeeded despite the barriers faced. This study examined the factors that they believe contributed to their success, as well as the areas where they felt support needs to be strengthened, not only for themselves but also for other Black boys who have come and will come after them.

The study's objective was to identify relevant themes, including mentorship, school climate, teacher expectations, and systemic inequities, through 19 semi-structured interviews with successful Black men who have achieved success both educationally and professionally.

Although past research has acknowledged the impact of student-teacher relationships and the importance of educators who offer cultural affirmation, more can be known about how these factors intersect with mentorship, peer influence, and practice at the policy level to formulate favorable long-term outcomes.

Limitations

This study's research was conducted with 19 participants who identified as Black men, specifically African Americans who successfully navigated the K-12 educational

system and achieved success beyond that experience. The participants were recruited using a snowball sampling method. Most participants resided in the Northeastern region of the United States, specifically in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and New York City. The data collection process consisted of 30- to 60-minute semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom, which were subsequently transcribed for thematic analysis.

Although this study offers profound insights into the experiences of Black males and their K-12 educational experiences, it does not negate the limitations inherent in this study. The sample of participants in this study consisted of Black men who had succeeded not only academically but also professionally. This reality overlooks the perspectives of Black men who did not graduate from high school or who took non-traditional paths, as well as those who faced various challenges and circumstances not addressed in this study.

Summary of Findings

This research study explored the lived experiences of 19 Black men who have gone on to lead productive and successful lives. Drawing from their experiences along their K-12 journey, they gained insight into the factors that they believe have contributed to their successful lives. Several themes emerged from the study that align with existing literature, expand upon existing literature, or contest existing literature in a way that provides value.

Several of the Black men in the study spoke about their experiences with strong parental involvement and the role it played in their journey through the K-12 system. For Black men, consistent parental advocacy, including high and non-negotiable academic expectations and active engagement in their academic pursuits, was a critical component

to their success. For several Black men in the study, strong and supportive family members provided a strong foundation, which set them up for success. African American families, which are often (mis) portrayed as “uninvolved” and disinterested in their sons’ schooling, are significant sources of support (McArdle & Turner, 2021, p.5).

Black men in the study emphasized the value that both formal and informal mentorship played in shaping their overall development. According to the Black men in the study, the mentors they encountered as figures served as guides, helping them through accountability and by helping them see what was possible, while also providing academic support. For participants, access to Black male mentors also provided cultural affirmation, which in turn made them feel seen and empowered. Again, the findings support past research, but also contribute to the literature by highlighting the impact of both formal and informal mentorship, as observed in Black teachers, coaches, and community leaders. Whether mentorship is formal or informal, it can help both the mentor and mentee find solidarity, validation, and satisfaction (Tibbetts & Parks Smith, 2023, p. 47).

In examining teacher expectations and their impact on the academic success of Black males, participants shared how the belief that teachers had in their potential as students helped shape their academic self-perception and increased their motivation and confidence levels. On the other hand, some Black men encountered low expectations from teachers that obstructed their academic progress. The findings support existing literature that discusses how teachers' expectations impact student achievement. An alterable predictor that appears to influence student academic achievement is the academic expectations of teachers (Flanagan et al., 2020).

This study also found that teachers who exhibited empathy through an understanding of Black culture made students feel like they belonged, as teachers showing a level of cultural understanding made Black men feel cared for by their teacher. This significantly impacted their academic and emotional development, fostering a sense of belonging, self-confidence, and resilience. The findings are consistent with those of Brooms (2019) and Leverette (2022), who highlight the value of relational teaching methodologies for Black male students.

Another factor discovered in this study was that peer relationships and a supportive community encouraged and affirmed the academic ambitions of Black boys. Involvement in sports by some participants was often celebrated culturally, which, coupled with academic success, allowed them to be accepted by their peers; otherwise, they might be considered a “nerd” or uncool. This finding highlighted peer influence as a factor that may significantly contribute to academic success and self-perception. The current literature does not emphasize peer influence. These findings were more consistent with the stories of participants in this study.

Black men in this study also expressed that their attainment of success stemmed from an innate drive, as well as the influence of a mentor, especially when there were limited or low levels of parental involvement. The findings in this study challenge the current literature, which often emphasizes parental involvement as a “must” for sustaining student success.

Future Research

Based on the existing research, the impact of stereotype threat, teacher expectations, and school climate continues to be a focus for the educational experiences

of Black males. Current research pinpoints how the stereotyping of Black males can shape their academic trajectories as well as their self-concept, which are frequently accompanied by lower teacher expectations and limited access to advanced coursework (Hawkins-Jones et al., 2021). Firstly, future research should explore how interventions geared towards culturally relevant mentoring can combat the occurrence of stereotype threat and foster a positive academic identity in Black male students.

The existing literature supports that teachers' expectations of student achievement are a focal point of concern. When a teacher communicates the belief that a student can succeed, the student adopts this belief and acts accordingly (Johnston et al., 2021). Future research should carefully evaluate the effectiveness of professional development offered to educators, especially those with a focus on implicit and anti-bias training, cultural proficiency, with the goal of reshaping how teachers perceive Black male students, which could result in the formation of improved and organic student-teacher relationships.

Current literature indicates that school climate is a crucial component in the success of Black males. Students and teachers need to foster supportive relationships that promote a sense of well-being and enhance academic engagement (Collins & Stevenson, 2023). Future research could explore how less punitive disciplinary practices, combined with the use of more restorative justice practices and curriculum that focus on culturally relevant content, affect the school climate and alleviate the negative impact of punitive discipline (Kunesh & Noltemyer, 2019).

The recruitment and retainment of Black male educators desperately need further exploration. Higher education does not recruit, retain, graduate, or employ Blacks at the same level as their white counterparts (Jeter & Melendez, 2022). Future research should

examine how financial incentives, such as housing stipends, student loan forgiveness, and mentorship programs, impact not only the recruitment but also the retention of Black male teachers.

Recommendations

While the experiences of the 19 Black men in this study exposed the challenges and support systems that guided them to success along their K-12 journey, through the sharing of their experiences, Black men provided an invaluable foundation of information for educators and school leaders to create better support systems for Black males with the intent to increase the likelihood of a positive school experience that leads to more success. Black men, through their narratives, shared factors that helped them succeed as well as factors that they felt were missing along their journey.

The value placed on mentorship and its overall impact on participants in the study was prominently emphasized. For this reason, schools should prioritize developing traditional mentoring programs and opportunities that effectively connect Black male students with a role model, preferably a Black male educator, coach, or respected community member. Importantly, for mentoring programs to be effective, they should focus on the entirety of the student, encompassing not only academics but also social-emotional development, cultural affirmation, and accountability. Mentorship, as stated by Tibbetts and Parks Smith (2023), enables both mentor and mentee to experience solidarity, validation, and satisfaction.

Additionally, while mentorship was seen as a valuable component to overall success by Black men in the study, Black men also emphasized the impact of seeing Black male educators in the school setting. The presence of Black males provides

familiarity with culture as well as a level of inspiration for what was possible, which made room for stronger relationships to be forged and greater levels of motivation. Leaders in education should focus not only on recruiting Black male educators but also on retaining them through various partnerships with Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), as well as offering scholarship opportunities and fostering supportive work environments for new teachers. Moreover, developing alternative route certification programs designed to appeal to Black men to draw them into teaching should be investigated. Current literature confirms that Black students are more likely to be taught by underprepared and inexperienced teachers due to challenges with recruitment (Darling-Hammond & Podolsky, 2019). Consequently, supporting strategies to improve teacher preparation, enhance teacher working conditions, and offer varied financial incentives, such as housing support or loan forgiveness, are crucial in addressing the existing inequities in education.

Literature also supports the reality that teachers leave schools with higher proportions of students of color and lower-income students, who tend to have lower salaries and poorer working conditions (Darling-Hammond & Podolsky, 2019). Policymakers must prioritize providing greater funding to these schools to increase salaries and improve working conditions. Additionally, at the school level, leaders can decrease teacher turnover by intensifying support for non-veteran teachers and cultivating collaborative, positive environments.

Black men also felt disengaged from the curriculum due to the feeling that they could not identify the link between classroom content and real-world importance. A curriculum overhaul by educators should include revisions that incorporate culturally

relevant topics and involve real-life skills, such as financial literacy and entrepreneurial development. Cultural proficiency is about serving all students, with a laser-like focus on historically underserved students. When education is offered in a culturally proficient manner, historically underserved students gain access to educational opportunities that are intended to lead to high academic achievement (Lindsey & Lindsey, 2016).

Several participants mentioned academic tracking and disciplinary disparities as systemic barriers to progress. Black men in the study shared various stories of unfair treatment and being wrongly disciplined, and not having access to higher-level courses due to racism. At the state level, a policy solution must be developed to address these existing and persistent inequities. While the Every Student Succeeds Act called for equitable distribution of qualified teachers, many state plans failed to ensure teachers were assigned to high-need schools and subjects (Darling-Hammond & Podolsky, 2019). Policies need to be revised, and evidence-based strategies, such as increasing pay for schools that struggle to staff them and improving school leadership, should be implemented. Districts should also be mindful of conducting reviews of conduct audits to track teacher assignments, student access to advanced-level courses, and disciplinary patterns.

Teacher expectations and relationships built between teachers and students proved to be significant for Black men in this study. Several participants in the study expressed that the teachers who held them to high expectations and did not let them make excuses when they did not meet those expectations had a lasting impact on their lives. Schools must consider this finding and invest in meaningful professional development that focuses on instruction steeped in equity, teaching that is trauma-informed, and fostering

authentic teacher-student relationships. Participants detailed how the teachers who checked in on them signified to them that they cared, which allowed them to be better engaged in school and develop emotional resilience. Emotional well-being and a sense of belonging are key for academic motivation and engagement (Collins & Stevenson, 2023). Strategies offered to teachers in the form of training opportunities would equip teachers with strategies to implement in their classrooms.

Several participants expressed what it did for them to see representation in school, particularly Black male educators. Educational leaders should focus on recruiting and retaining efforts to attract more Black male teachers to the field. This can be achieved by creating partnerships with local colleges and Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Scholarship opportunities and work environments that provide proper mentorship to retain Black male educators who are in the field. However, in the meantime, because the number of Black male educators is so low, the focus should be placed on equipping current non- Black educators with the tools they need to be what Black boys need them to be. When recruitment is difficult, many children are taught by people who have not completed or even started a teacher preparation program, which is why children from lower-income families and students of color are more likely to be taught by unprepared and inexperienced teachers (Darling-Hammond & Podolsky, 2019).

Teachers also leave schools with higher proportions of students of color and lower-income students, who tend to have lower salaries and poorer working conditions (Darling-Hammond & Podolsky, 2019). Policy makers must do their best to provide greater levels of funding to these schools to increase salaries and improve working conditions. School leaders can also create better working conditions for teachers by

offering a more intensive support system to new teachers, so that they do not leave the field, and to reduce teacher turnover in schools that are majority Black.

State policies - changes to state plans to address the inequitable distribution of qualified teachers, which were submitted and examined in 2015 under the Every Student Succeeds Act. Many states were found not to have been targeted to ensure that teachers work in subject areas, schools, and communities with persistent shortages of qualified teachers. The higher-quality plans appear to address inequitable funding schemes by allowing wealthier districts to offer higher salaries and focus on improving the quality of school leaders in hard-to-staff schools, given that principals have a significant influence on teachers' working conditions. High-quality state plans also include evidence-based policies, such as incentivizing teachers to work in high-need schools and subjects by providing increased compensation.

Conclusion

While the academic discussion on Black male academic achievement has frequently emphasized negativity in the form of failure, discipline, and disengagement, the findings from this study illuminate another narrative not often discussed pertaining to Black males. This study highlights the strength and resilience of Black males, which ultimately lead to their success. Through the stories of 19 Black men who found a way to thrive despite the challenges they faced in the K-12 system, the findings make clear the impact of various factors, including high expectations, cultural affirmation, empathetic educators, and mentorship, on their academic identity and life success. These themes were found to be consistent across the narratives of Black males in this study, supporting the existing literature on the achievement of Black male students. Although several

participants in the study had unique paths along their K-12 journey, the commonalities in their stories reinforced the notion that student-oriented practices, when implemented with intentionality, can have a lasting impact.

While some progress has been made, there is still a need for school leaders to cultivate and create equitable opportunities in the form of inclusive curricula and supportive environments for Black males. The stories as told by Black men in this study expose the need for educators to be better prepared to cultivate strong student-teacher relationships that involve affirmation and hold Black males to high standards. The effort from educators in this regard can no longer be reactionary; instead, it must become the norm for every school building, classroom, educator, and leader. In pursuit of closing the existing achievement gap, this study demonstrates that Black male success is possible, and it is even more likely when systems are in place to support Black males.

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