THE VOICES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ADOLESCENT MALES:

SCHOOLING EXPERIENCES IN URBAN SCHOOLS

by

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ABSTRACT

The ongoing phenomenon of African American males' poor academic

performance has been evidenced in research data, indicating this subgroup of students

tends to have one of the largest academic deficits, behavioral issues, and high school

dropout rates which often leads to the school-to-prison pipeline process (Craven et al.,

2020). The researcher set forth to better understand why African American male students

remain academically at-risk students and if there are confounding reasons when students

feel connected or marginalized from school and learning environments. Therefore, the

purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative study aimed to engage fourth-

grade African American adolescents to share personal experiences and stories about

learning in public school.

This study was guided by Critical Race Theory, which supports the power of

"voice" for minority students to share their perspectives of teachers and peers (Delgado,

1989). CRT believes that educational policies are not equitable and can often hinder

African American students from receiving optimal educational opportunities and leverage

in attaining academic success. Therefore, CRT scholars analyze educational reform,

policies, and practices and support gaps in the literature to better understand why this

embodiment of students is adversely challenged in academics and future success.

In this study, African American adolescent males were recruited from one

elementary school located in a southern, mid-sized urban setting in the Middle Tennessee

area. After conducting a seven-week qualitative analysis of transcripts from participants'

focus group interviews and classroom observations, the researcher utilized a constant

comparative method to force-align themes of poverty, trauma, self-efficacy, and school

belonging. Findings in this study provide insight into how African American male adolescents perceive school, their learning experiences, and how external factors can impede academic achievement.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

According to National Assessment for Educational Progress (2020), school

districts are under continuous pressure to increase student achievement. Over five

decades ago, student achievement was a focus in the public school system. Beginning

with the Space Race in 1957 through the school choice movement in 2017, public schools

remain challenged to increase student achievement. While some educational

improvement endeavors focused on all students, disaggregation of data shows an even

more revealing story. Schools historically were designed to educate and improve all

students' life outcomes; however, in the 1970s, the first educational progress report

revealed a staggering difference in achievement gaps between black and white students.

After four decades of national reporting, achievement gaps between these groups have

narrowed from the 1970s. However, African American students have continued to score,

on average, 30 points below, revealing African American students are not gaining the

necessary literacy skills needed to acquire successful educational opportunities or careers.

Table 1

Ethnicity Academic Data

Reading	African American	White
1971	170	214
1980	189	221
1992	184	218
2019	204	230

Research from NAEP Report Card (2019) revealed that African American males have the most significant negative achievement gaps of students enrolled in public schools. Reading and math scores account for an average of 28 points lower than those of their white peers.

While other facets of educational improvements are justified, the educational system has implemented minimal support specifically for African American males and has relegated the voices of students who can share what they experience in public schooling from teachers and peers (Cunningham et al., 2013). One of the core tenets in Critical Race Theory, CRT, included recognition of personal and community experiences that serve as sources of knowledge (Matsuda, 1993). CRT scholars believe voice is a powerful mechanism when utilized through personal narratives and stories to counteract stories and practices of the dominant group (Delgado, 1989).

In 2002, Fernandez presented a story of a student reflecting on his experiences in an urban Chicago high school. The student's perspective and accounts describe low expectations on the parts of the teacher, school-wide focus on discipline, negative stereotypes, and tracking for vocational rather than college prep courses. Providing a voice for students who would otherwise not be heard allows students to provide their perspective and educational experiences (Teranishi, 2002). Therefore, understanding gleaned from students may induce educators to develop educational systems in which all students can benefit and academically grow.

Background of the Problem

Outcomes for African American males educated in public schooling depict students' daunting reality of underperforming academically while receiving the most discipline referrals, special education classes, and high school dropout rates (State of America's Children, 2020). Craven et al., (2020) conducted a study connecting excessive discipline referrals, a disproportionate percentage of students placed in special education, and the percentage of high school dropouts to the school-to-prison pipeline process. Critical race theorists argue that educational policy functions as social control and oppression and that the school-to-prison pipeline is a tool used by Whites supremacists (Gillborn, 2014; McCarter, 2017). Delgado & Stefancic (2017) connote the primary function of the pipeline can be characterized as a criminalization process for African American children by preparing them for the prison system and obstructing their path to higher education, social advancement, and increased financial freedom. These researchers suggest such factors directly correlate to students being legally pushed out of schools through exclusionary methods and place students in juvenile justice systems, which in turn end in incarceration and loss of voting rights.

In a report released by Youth Confinement: The Whole Pie (2019), of the 43,000 students placed in juvenile facilities across the country, 14% are under 18, and 42% are African American males. Students involved in the school-to-prison pipeline process who are continuously suspended or expelled from school, or held in juvenile justice facilities, tend to have arduous problems and poor long-term outcome (Advancement Project et al., 2011) These problems are suggested to be poverty, trauma, and mental health difficulties as reasons for their initial involvement with the juvenile justice system (Mallett, 2013).

This report directly correlates to the paramount risks believed to be directly associated with poverty, schooling experiences, and mental health that affect African American males disproportionately. These statistics echo concerns about the elevated and almost unavoidable risk of future incarcerations.

Researchers suggest a growing number of educational policies are believed to dissolve student connections with schools, leaving a greater tendency for students to be involved with law enforcement (Hughes et al., 2020). The origin of such policies is linked to zero-tolerance policies and inflexible discipline guidelines (Curtis, 2014). Schools tend to rely on codes of conduct and handbooks to inform expectations of behaviors that could result in exclusionary actions without consideration provided. Research has shown zero-tolerance school policies tend to put students at greater risk for decreased connectivity to school, illegal behavior, and poor academic achievement that leads to the school-to-prison pipeline process (Boccanfuso & Kuhfeld, 2011; Casella, 2003; Reyes, 2006; Skiba, Arredondo, & Rausch, 2014). Infractions such as disrespect, classroom disruption, willful defiance, and dress code violations are some of the most repeated codes of conduct violated, resulting in loss of instructional time and time spent out of school (Advancement Project et al., 2011).

Additionally, implicit bias of teachers has been a contributing factor when considering disciplinary implementation of policies that have been known to firmly apply to African American male students (Hughes et al., 2020).

Implicit bias, according to Greenwald & Krieger (2006) are the attitudes or stereotypes that affect people's understanding, action, and decision in an unconscious manner. While implicit bias is not suggested to be a direct cause of racial disparities in

education, it supports many discriminatory behaviors that occur in schools (Carter et al., 2017). The magnitude of implicit bias can affect both the frequency in which African American males are disciplined as well as the severity of the disciplinary consequences. In a data review of national Office Discipline Referrals, racial discipline was disproportionality from subjective (judgement from the teacher) rather than objective (violation of previously stated rules). In some cases, the subjective Office Discipline Referrals explained as much as three times the variance in discipline percentages (Girvan et al., 2017).

As a result of these consequences, African American students are placed at greater risk of diminishing academic success, high school completion, and underemployment (Lynch et al., 2016; Skiba et al., 2014; Theriot, 2013). According to Skiba et al., (2014), schools' actions through use of excessive discipline referrals to law enforcement have become a pathway to the school-to-prison pipeline by using systematic policies and practices that push students away from schools and into the juvenile system.

The term juvenile is not a universal term when referred to the criminal justice system as the legal construction reflects differences in age, historical, political, and economic developments that determine youth justice institutional structures (Abrams et al., 2018). Youth identified under the juvenile age or construct of the state are considered less liable or responsible than adults and are more capable of change and rehabilitation; therefore, youth are placed in less harsh facilities than adults in the criminal justice system. This system is designed to house and reform juveniles who have been legally removed from homes, communities, schools, and society altogether.

For over thirty years, schools have created a set of policies and practices that make it more likely for vulnerable students to face criminal involvement with juvenile courts than receive a quality education. Mowen & Brent (2016) found that students who were suspended or expelled for a discipline violation were three times more likely to enter the juvenile justice system and twice as likely to repeat a grade. Hence, reduction in classroom learning time is a predictor that contributes to delinquency for students and disproportionate negative gaps in achievement with minimal opportunities in getting students to overcome academic challenges (Yang et al., 2018).

Grace & Nelson (2019) conducted a study on African American high school males residing in low socio-economic neighborhoods and identified with the school-to-prison pipeline process. The study aimed to examine the academic and institutional structures that incapacitated students to succeed in public schools.

The researchers used 45-minute semi-structured interviews using audiotape, later transcribed and analyzed. Previous violations of participants were bracketed as possession of marijuana, fighting on school property, gun possession, skipping class, and disrespect towards teachers and staff to analyze and understand the essence of the experience from participants' perspective.

The researchers concluded participants felt teachers and other staff unjustly labeled, stigmatized, and shunned high academic expectations, resulting in students feeling ostracized from peers and learning opportunities, poor perception of internal self, and lack of motivation to succeed academically. Participants felt their relationship with teachers and other staff played a significant role in their academic

downfall, and violations from their record was continuously judged and held against them, creating minimal chances for students to succeed.

Delgado & Stefancic (2017) infer that schools use concerted efforts to utilize multiple suspensions and expulsion referrals to introduce students into a juvenile system that begin with the school's process to prison pipeline where students are being prepped for the prison system and deteriorating their path to higher education. Although further community-based research is needed to examine the relations between African American males and their educational well-being, multiple middle and high school studies focus on students' academic pathways. Preceding research has provided evidence of the gap between African American males and other races, hence there is still a need for research in narrowing down the distinct needs and strengths of what elementary students lack to thrive academically.

Research conducted by Kunjufu (2010) suggests that African American males may stop caring about school and their academic outcomes by the time they reach fourth grade. He further contends teachers tend to stop nurturing and promoting achievement and enthusiasm for learning as early as fourth grade, resulting in disengagement and adverse academic outcomes amongst students. A dominant factor identified by Kunjufu suggests there is a concern between illiteracy and the high percentage of African American males who are in prison. In his research, Kunjufu finds school leaders understand the harm in not producing literate students that potentially lead to prison detainment; however, monies are spent on building prisons rather than investing in the education of young African American males. Additionally, Kunjufu (2010) addresses the problem of African American males from the perspective of the school. Instructors saw

themselves as teaching subjects, not students. Teachers did not see the importance in understanding student's learning styles that best suit their academic progress and motivating students was not a real concern to sustain student engagement and accountability.

In a more contemporary longitudinal study, Mary et al., (2018) conducted a study to address what factors facilitate or hinder African American students' early academic success. Of the three questions posed, one question sought to understand how African American adolescents describe their academic achievement. This study indicates that elementary students begin developing a perceived imbalance of power between themselves, their teachers, peers, and schools well before entering high school. Researchers were not surprised participants stressed how teachers held inherent beliefs over perceived gaps in educational attainment for African American students. It was further suggested that African American students (males) perceive and encounter negative perceptions and stereotypes surrounding their academic potential and opportunities are grounded in race, socio-economic status, and environment (Mary et al., 2018).

As described earlier, the State of America's Children (2020) research has provided evidence of the academic gap between African American males and other races, yet further research is needed on how educators understand this phenomenon in supporting the most vulnerable students in the public school system. Nationally represented studies of students from various schools, neighborhoods, and associated risk factors have done little to inform local efforts where the students' population is inaccurately represented.

In a longitudinal study conducted by Gaddis & Lauen (2014), researchers posed questionable concerns if the educational policies in elementary and middle school reduce achievement gaps and inequality by focusing on within school process, school accountability, rather than between school-processes such as the distribution of resources. This study analyzed how schools responded to the pressure to eliminate gaps and how racial and poverty influenced responses. Researchers wanted to know if African American sub-group accountability pressure differed by school racial and poverty composition and if accountability pressure would narrow black-white achievement gaps in math and reading.

Gaddis & Lauen (2014) found that schools with the lowest percentage of poor students and the lowest white poverty ratios have the most extensive overall accountability effects on the black-white math test gaps. Schools with the lowest white poverty ratios were also shown to have large accountability (positive academic outcomes) on the black-white reading gaps. However, when researchers adjusted for different data marks of black-white gaps, the differential school poverty results for math remained significant.

The significance between schools based on the poverty ratio revealed that students who experienced poverty, when provided an opportunity to attend more affluent schools, were able to close the black-white math gap. Thus, poverty is a factor in where students attend school and the academic experiences students receive. Hence, reading was found to require more focused attention toward individual students' needs, requiring schools to have additional resources. Findings are in coherence with historical research from the Coleman Report (1966), echoing "social composition of the student body is

more highly related to achievement, independent of the student's social background, than is any other school factor" (p. 325).

In 2019, Brooms conducted a qualitative research study that examines 550 African American students enrolled in an all-male Title 1 public charter secondary school, centrally located in a large urban city. The researcher aimed to understand how African American male students understood and articulated their educational experiences. The target population of participants consists of African American males who all enrolled from the same public-charter school and lived in the same urban city where two-thirds of students lived in low-income households.

Findings from the research engenders various reasons why students enrolled in the school, as some felt pressured by family members while others entered trying to understand better what school was about. The school climate and environment based on student experiences were inviting, uplifting, and instilled a sense of pride in students' work and worth.

Additionally, students felt a welcoming and supportive atmosphere that increased students' beliefs in themselves, self-efficacy, and robust teacher relationships. Broom (2019) emphasizes that the study's findings are important for parents and educational stakeholders to consider for improving student performance, especially in large urban city schools. Students found that school culture and their sense of belonging were influential in making them feel valued and affirmed, hence providing future academic opportunities for success.

This present study focuses on how African American males feel connected or disconnected from classroom learning experiences. This study rests highly on Broom's

(2019) and Duncan's (2010) research to support the rationale and importance for African American males to share their side of the story of what educational experiences they have encountered between teachers and peers. Duncan's two-year ethnographic study recounts stories led from focus group sessions and one-on-one interviews with students to examine teachers and administrators' treatment of African American males. Findings from the study suggest the school's reputation of caring for all students was an inaccurate description, as the school's culture reinforced the notion African American males were strange, did not belong, and the academic competency of students was undermined.

Table 2

Duncan's Study Overview
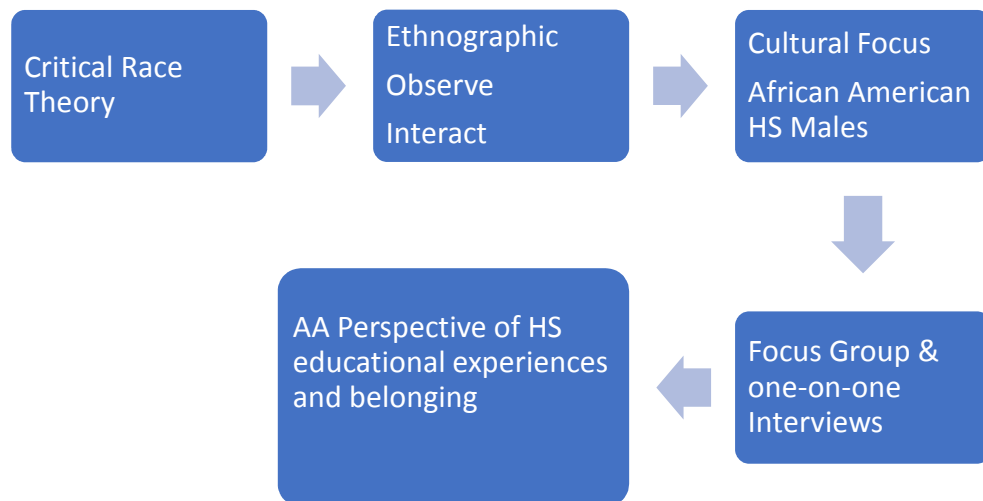
Statement of the Problem

The latest available state assessment data revealed African American males scored lower than any subgroup in math and reading (The Nation's Report Card, 2019). The 2019 data continues to reflect research from Milner & Lomety (2014) that suggests low socio-economic, lack of resources, teaching practices, and school leadership are reasons leading to adverse outcomes such as disproportionate representation in special education, multiple accounts of suspension and expulsion from punitive acts, and staggeringly high school dropout percentages.

Since the 1970s, historical and contemporary literature examines students' academic challenges and experiences mostly comprised of middle and high school students, yet there is little research capturing elementary African American fourth-grade males' experiences. Academic data documentation of student achievement relies on national data sets that indicate outcomes of fourth, eighth, and twelfth-grade students. It was not until No Child Left Behind (NCLB) when students were held accountable for results, which further highlighted the academic disparities. Outcomes from the data suggest long-standing gaps in achievement core subjects such as reading and math between fourth-grade African American adolescents and their peers (NAEP, 2020).

The knowledge gap lies in African American elementary males' educational perspectives and if external factors such as poverty, trauma, self-efficacy, and school-belonging contribute to how students perceive their learning experiences in their elementary years.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative study aims to engage African American adolescents to share their personal experiences about elementary public-school experiences that have enhanced or hindered their learning. This method is focused on the experiences of groups as an attempt to unveil the world as experienced by subjects through life world stories (Kafle, 2011). Suddick et al., (2020) suggests that:

> Human lives, experiences and the world as lived (human lifeworld and its phenomena) are understood within their particular temporal, situated frame through an interpretivist epistemology, that draws upon intentionality, intersubjectivity, and hermeneutics as a theory of interpretation. (p. 2).

This approach is found suitable as it aims to interpret the fundamental structures of life experiences and recognize the experiences and pedagogical values, such as those involved in the current study (Guillen, 2019).

Primary Research Questions

The study includes two research questions that align with the research projected scope and purpose, and outline the central phenomenon. The researcher will use focus group interview sessions and classroom observations to address the following questions:

RQ1: What are the perspectives of African American male adolescents and their experiences in urban schools?

RQ2: How and when do they feel connected (valued) and disconnected (marginalized) from classroom learning?

The questions are in line to understand individuals' experiences and perceptions regarding the phenomenon under study (Kalu, 2019). Researchers Korstjens & Moser (2017) connote that to enable a thorough, in-depth description, exploration, or

explanation of the phenomenon under study, in general, research questions need to be broad and open to unexpected findings. Rubin & Rubin (2012) suggest that initial interview questions should be broad enough not to limit or bias the participant's response.

Significance of the Study

Data indicates that African American males serve as the most at-risk group of students in the United States. According to the Southern Regional Education Board (2019), African American males are the lowest subgroup to complete (graduate) high school with a 59% dropout rate. However, it is worth considering students' educational experiences before secondary school to contribute to this distortional dropout rate. This study seeks to unveil potential factors that contribute to the plight of African American adolescent males' learning experiences as fourth-grade students. The data obtained from the study will be added to existing bodies of literature in efforts to understand and embrace the diverse background experiences of students to promote higher academic expectations, student engagement, and academic performance.

The study results may also be beneficial in helping to support teacher knowledge of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. CRP is a framework for effective teaching and engaging students of all cultural and linguistic backgrounds regardless of race, gender, language, and socio-economic status (Gay, 2010). Research has shown that CRP has excellent potential in increasing minority students' performance (Howard & Terry, 2011). Participants of the study are in the initial phases of K-12 public schools; therefore, educators stand to gain an understanding of the importance and need for cultural competence and professional training as an attempt to engage, connect, motivate, and

provide opportunities for students and the likelihood of increasing academic achievement

(Kafle, 2013).

Research Design

The researcher will use a purposeful sampling method in which potential

candidates are all African American adolescents and have experienced urban city

schooling since Kindergarten and have been identified as students' who are dropping

below grade level academic proficiency based on grades, formative and summative

assessment data. According to Patton (2002), purposeful sampling techniques for primary

research have been well described as:

> The logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich
> cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can
> learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry,
> thus the term purposeful sampling. Studying information-rich cases yields insights
> and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations. (p.230).

At the onset of the study, the researcher along with two fourth-grade teachers will

decide which fourth grade male candidates to invite into the study. Candidates selected

are enrolled at the same school and will be based on African American fourth-grade

males who meet the criteria of the study and return parental consent and child assent

approval forms. Once the researcher has received all assent and consent forms from those

interested in the study, participants will be placed in focus groups consisting of four

participants per group. The term "focused interview" was introduced by Fiske, Kendall &

Merton (1956, 1990) as a method for participants to share detailed information about

personal experiences as a group with the researcher or moderator. Focus group

participants commonly share backgrounds, past experiences, or characteristics that allow

the researcher to delve deeper into the studied or focused topic (Zeleeva, 2019).

Participants will be observed in their natural classroom setting, while focus group sessions will be conducted on school grounds during non-instructional school hours. Instruments intended to be utilized by the researcher include interview questions, field notes, and student-written artifacts.

As defined by Seidman (2013) & Vygotsky (1987), the qualitative interview is used as a means through dialogue to make sense of and determine the meaning of specific events, experiences, or phenomena. Interview questions will be designed to begin broad and become more focused as the researcher becomes more knowledgeable about the topic and types of response from tour questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Brinkman & Kvale (2015) define the structure of qualitative interview questions like the following:

> An interview question can be evaluated with respect to both a thematic and a dynamic Dimension: thematically with regard to producing knowledge and dynamically with regard to the interpersonal relationship in the interview. A good interview question, should contribute thematically to knowledge production and dynamically to promoting a good interview interaction. (p. 157).

The study is designed for an eight- week period during which the researcher will conduct weekly 1-hour focus group interview sessions and 1-hour math classroom observations that will not interfere with blocks of instructional time in adherence to school-district regulations and school policy.

Theoretical Framework

Theory condenses qualitative research into statements and transferability of social life to other settings, contexts, populations, and time periods. According to Saldana & Omasta (2018), qualitative research holds four truths: (1) predicts and controls actions through an if-then logic, (2) accounts for variation, (3) explains how and why something happens through causation, and (4) provides insights for improving social life. Maxwell

(2013) defines the theoretical framework as a tentative theory about the phenomena being studied, informing the study's design. A theoretical framework also correlates the relationship between theories and includes concepts, terms, definitions, and support in response to research questions (Merriam, 2009).

Historically, education research rejected the notion that racism played an integral part in education. The failing academic measures of this population of students suggested that students were dysfunctional and could not operate in mainstream society, leaving the teachers' responsibility to discipline and bring structure to their chaotic lives (Lareau 2011; Posey-Maddox 2014). Scholars who protest this argument employed race and racism in education, especially for African American students, was prevalent and crippling students from future academic endeavors and job opportunities (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Historically the tenet of CRT was developed and rooted in the field of law; however, 25 years ago, Ladson-Billings & Tate introduced the framework into the field of education as a conceptual framework appropriate for explaining the underlying dynamics of African American male interactions with their educational environment and the lifelong implications (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Smith, 2009).

Critical Race Theory (CRT), birthed from a protest, press scholars to consider how racism, educational inequalities, disparate suspension and expulsion outcomes, and special education placements are widespread to African American students (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

CRT is well documented in education as it illustrates the struggle of equity for African American students to learn reading, writing, and opportunities to attend schools

that are well resourced with expert teachers (Dixson et al., 2015). Educational policies and practices in the United States contrived from inequitable education outcomes for students, as noted by Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995), are part of a more extensive political system that is premised on the subordination of African American people and those who live in poverty. Despite their field of study, CRT scholars believe examining and exposing ways racial inequality manifest and prevail must inform social actions that lead to social change. The need for social change galvanized CRT scholars to analyze educational issues, policy, practice, or events to theorize why racialized educational inequities are occurring (Dixson, 2018).

In accordance with African American males' physical and emotional issues, students are faced with distinct social and environmental challenges. Students must learn to face adversity from racism and its associated stressors, including family stressors, urban stressors, and educational stressors (Grace & Nelson, 2019). Students experiencing racial microaggressions are found to be visible mostly in instructional practice and disciplinary measures. These volatile acts have left some researchers assuming that African American males are unmotivated to learn and aggressive in behavior. These notions weigh heavily on the way students are treated in schools and commonly internalized, resulting in disengagement from school and classroom learning (Grace & Nelson, 2019; Noeguera, 2003).

Positionality

For this study, it is assumed that fourth-grade African American male students will share similar demographics and background as students will have experience in city schooling since kindergarten. As the study evolves, the researcher assumes that students

may begin to feel more comfortable with the researcher, and a deeper layer of trust and vulnerability will emerge. Additionally, as data is collected and analyzed from the study, the researcher assumes a theme will emerge that aids in understanding why African American adolescent males continue to underperform academically.

Limitations

Limitations are an imposed restriction or potential weakness typically out of the researcher's control and associated with the research design (Theofanidis & Fountaouki, 2018). Several limitations exist; therefore, the researcher must acknowledge such bias at the onset of the study.

1. The researcher acknowledges teachers' and administrators' perceptions of African American fourth-grade male adolescents will not be examined in this study.

2. The researcher acknowledges the limited number of participants who represent a more generalized population. Although the researchers attempt to gain perceptions of African American male students, the study's results may be delimited in depicting a more generalized population (McGee, 2013).

3. The researcher acknowledges that this study's outcomes could have no bearing on students' future academic success involved in the study.

Scope

This study's scope is limited to student participants who are part of an urban school district. The researcher has no intent to explore participants who do not meet the study's criteria; therefore, this research's scope does not include the school community's stakeholders. Instead, the researcher will limit the study's scope to include eight African

American male adolescents, currently in fourth grade, and share lived experiences of urban city schooling.

Delimitations

Delimitations are mainly concerned with the study's theoretical background, objective, research questions, and variables utilized for the study and are typically set by the researcher so that the study's aim does not become impossible to achieve (Theofanidis, Fountaouki, 2018). Based on the nature of the hermeneutic phenomenology study:

1. The study's delimitations include the number of participants, the target population of students, and the demographical location of schools identified in a single school district.

2. The set number of research questions posed to understand African American male adolescents' dispositions regarding classroom learning in urban city schools.

Definition of Terms

For this study's purpose, the researcher will define several terms to add understanding to the research discussion. Selected terms will be used in various areas of the dissertation in supporting the methodology, theoretical framework, data collection, and data analysis of the study.

Adolescent (or Adolescence):

Refers to the stage of physical and emotional development from childhood age (9) to adulthood (18). Refers to the natural /normal maturation process stages of

development as seen in children through their maturation process from childhood to adulthood and the physical and emotional changes of males and females (Allen & Waterman, 2019). However, for this study, adolescents are referred to as a subgroup of ages 9-11 and identified as fourth-grade students.

Academic Achievement:

Appraisals of value of students' present, future, and past academic outcomes of success or failure (Putwain et al., 2020). This study refers to academic achievement as students' trajectory on a subject level that demonstrates attainment above or below academic expectations as measured by state math and reading scores, graduation rates, and grade retention.

Poverty:

Poverty in the context of this study is focused on the economic conditions experienced by African American households with income below the federal poverty line, which is under $25,000 per year and presents adversity in housing, institutional opportunities, employment, racial segregation, and access to healthcare (Alfieri, 2019).

Trauma:

Trauma is defined by the American Psychological Association (2020) as events as those in which an individual experiences, witnesses, or is confronted with actual or threatened death or threatened physical integrity of self or others.

Self-Efficacy:

A term defined by Bandura (1997) referencing beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute actions needed to produce attainment. In the context of this

study, self-efficacy refers to African American male students' personal beliefs, motivation, academic goals, and academic outcomes.

Self-Belonging:

Students' self-belonging is associated with academic outcomes for urban African American students who have experienced discrimination in educational institutions (Murphy & Zirkle, 2016; Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008).

Focus group:

Utilizes a qualitative research method used to place a small group of participants with similar characteristics picking up on one another's interests that represent a specific demographic from whom data may be gathered about a particular topic or subject (Sim & Waterfield, 2019).

Hermeneutics:

A research method focused on individuals' subjective experiences as an attempt to understand the world experienced by the subject through stories (Kafle, 2011; van Manen, 1994).

Phenomenology:

According to Landridge (2007), phenomenology focuses on the human experience as a discipline that focuses on people's perceptions of the world in which they live and what it means to them.

Hermeneutic phenomenology:

Is a methodological attempt to understand the interpretation of subjects' lived experiences through an interpretive process to unveil the world as experienced by the subject through their life world stories (Kafle, 2011).

Coding:

Coding is interacting with data across the research study span in which links of data begin to form ideas and understanding for the researcher to make sense of the phenomenon occurring (Richards & Morse, 2013). The coding process entails work on the researcher to scrutinize and organize collected data observations of participants in a hermeneutical phenomenological research project who are willing to share their experience and can enhance or add to the rich and meaningful experience of the phenomenon by relating codes to possible relationships and satisfy research questions (Laverty, 2003; Locke, 2015).

Chapter Summary

Chapter 1 aims to describe the phenomenon of African American males' experience in public school systems and leading variables that have resulted in disproportionate school infractions that have led to disparaging academic outcomes and staggeringly high school dropout percentages. The chapter outlines the historical context and background of this phenomenon, a current statement of the problem, purpose, significance, and research questions the researcher aims to satisfy in the conduction of the study. The present research study employs a qualitative research approach to explore how African American males feel connected or disconnected to classroom learning experiences.

Chapter 2 provides a literature review to address African American adolescents' perceptions and how impoverished environments, trauma, self-efficacy, and school belonging contribute to students not learning. The specific nature of Chapter 2 is to address the foundational theories and current literature correlated with this study.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to focus on the perspectives of how African American adolescent males feel connected or disconnected to classroom learning experiences through their voices and stories of urban schooling. This chapter presents a literature review to employ empirical research to contextualize this study's academic foreground and purpose. First, the chapter reviews the literature on African American students' academic rankings and disparities. Second, this chapter unveils literature to support how perceptions of African American male adolescents, impoverished environments, trauma, self-efficacy, and school-belonging contribute to why urban African American male students are not learning. Lastly, the chapter concludes with a brief introduction of the Critical Race Theory framework to support minority cultural views and bring student "voice" to the present phenomenon.

The researcher is aware there are few credible studies explicitly focused on African American male adolescents in urban schools and further aware even fewer studies focused on fourth-grade African American males. Studies and ideologies embodied in this chapter present a broad focus on African American males' academic plight over ten years of research. Thus, the current study may provide new findings to address African American male adolescents' perspectives and their learning experiences to add to scholarly-practitioners' body of literature in education.

Academic Destruction

This study builds from an exponential research body, captivating the criticalness of

African American male adolescents' trajectory of academic destruction. Statistical data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), total enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools increased from 47.2 million students to 50.7 million students between Fall 2000 and Fall 2017 and is projected to increase to 51.1 million students in Fall 2029 (NCES, 2020). Considering the increasing number of students enrolled in public schooling, racial subgroups of public-school students have disproportionately shifted. Data revealed that the Hispanic student population grew 11% from 2000 to 2017, with Asian student enrollment growing to 5% in the same time frame. However, when NCES (2020) examined the African American student population, enrollment fell by 2%.

In racial polling of subgroups enrolled in high schools across the nation, African American students represented 79% compared to 92% Asian and 89% of their White peers (NCES, 2020). There is a more disparaging data point to be made between African American males and females. For over two decades, African American male high school dropout rates compared to African American females reveal a much higher dropout rate of 7.8% than females 4.9% (NCES, 2020). Based on statistical data alone, African American males are at the nucleus of learning gaps and academic disadvantages in American schools.

Lack of education illuminates a predeterminate factor of young, African American lives and subsequent outcomes of being prepared for college or careers. Despite multiple attempts through curriculum reforms, equality of African American students' college and career readiness has yet to reach satisfactory percentages. African American students often experience difficulties in postsecondary education due to

instructional barriers in elementary and middle schools that have impeded future opportunities (Turner, 2019). More specifically, African American male adolescents remain a significant focus as this subgroup remains one of the more academically marginalized groups of students with the least favorable academic outcomes (Noguera, 2008).

When looking at African American males' entire educational performance, the results are less than disturbing. Data indicators aligning to academic progress, enrollment, achievement, gifted programs, and honors courses reveal a ghostly image of African American males being present in each category (Schott Foundation, 2015). The Schott's Foundation has agreed that African American adolescents receive the most discipline referrals, dropout rates, special education classes, and grade retention than any subgroup of students.

The U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (2020) denotes suspension rates for adolescent African American males are almost double that of their white peers. Punitive behavioral issues of African American males often result in a vast number of suspensions and expulsions, which lead to significant loss of time in classrooms and loss of instruction. School disciplinary practices and procedures unreasonably place African American adolescents in special education categories such as emotional or behavioral disturbance, which inevitably shows students having the least favorable outcomes for high-grade point averages, completion of high school, or successful employment rates (Bradley, Dolittle, & Bartolotta, 2008; Stevens-Watkins & Graves, 2011; Wagner, Newman & Cameto, 2004).

Ferguson (2000) & Noguera (2020) noted institutional practices surrounding behavior give life to producing massive despair and failures among African American students while increasing negative behaviors altogether. Such issues of African American adolescent males have become an immunity in schools with expectations of student failure and eventually drop out as this has become our norm in American schools (Noguera, 2008).

Kunjufu (2010) notes that African American males physically leave school by ninth grade yet leave emotionally and academically by fourth grade. African American male adolescent dropout rates are as much as 70% in certain demographic regions, which statistically approximates to 100,000 African American males dropping out of school each year. Hence, 80% of males identified as dropouts concentrate 20 urban cities and over 2,000 schools (Kunjufu, 2010).

Historically, there have been programs in service of African American adolescents for over 50 years to help defeat academic disparities, yet there is minimal evidence that ascribes to a positive, systemic change for students (University of Minnesota Libraries, 2020). Researchers today are still unsure why African American adolescents remain disproportionately low in academics and the largest subgroup of students who drop out of school. However, scholars and researchers understand that environmental and cultural factors significantly influence academic performance (Noguera, 2008).

In 2019, Grace & Nelson conducted a study of African American high school males residing in low socio-economic neighborhoods and identified with the school-to-prison pipeline. The study aimed to examine the academic and institutional structures

that incapacitated students to succeed in public schools. Researchers conducted a phenomenological study to gain insight into students who faced school disciplinary actions, repeated encounters with the juvenile justice system, and how those experiences impacted academic outcomes. They concluded that participants felt teachers and other staff unjustly labeled, stigmatized, and shunned high academic expectations, resulting in students feeling ostracized from peers and learning opportunities, poor perception of internal self, and lack of motivation to succeed academically.

Outside of academic disparities and unfair discipline practices, African American male adolescents also struggle to understand their own cultural experiences while attempting to adhere to the dominant European culture's behaviors and expectations. Additionally, African American males tend to face a higher level of social injustices, political discrimination, and marginalized educational practices within their African American community (Boykin, 1986; Boykin & Toms, 1985; Thornton, 1997).

In acknowledging why African American male adolescents are still not learning, studies suggest four contended factors to understand the learning experiences this subgroup of students' face. The researcher intends to explore how poverty, trauma, self-efficacy, and school-belonging commit learning experiences African American adolescent males share through stories and personal encounters.

An ethnographic study conducted by Duncan (2010) uses Critical Race Theory (CRT) literature to analyze African American males' differences and conditions in an urban high school. Critical race theorists argue racism is ingrained in society's features,

embedded in practices and values shown in the formal phenomenon of racialized power, such as schooling (Crenshaw, 1995).

Duncan's (2010) ethnographic study seeks to understand what leads to academic destruction from African American males' perception behind school walls. Duncan attained employment as a classroom teacher to become infused into the school's culture and gain a deeper context of the academic and social lives of African American males who were enrolled in a school known for its ethos of caring and academic excellence.

The school was centrally located in the Midwestern part of the United States, comprised of 266 students (155 females and 111 males). In terms of racial percentages, the school was equally split between black and white students. The principal was a black female, the assistant principal for data collection and processing was a white male, and an assistant principal for curriculum and instruction was a white female. Seventeen teachers were listed on staff; ten were African American (Duncan, 2010).

Duncan's two-year in-depth ethnographic study recounts stories, focus group sessions, and interviews with students, teachers, and administrators regarding their theories of marginalization and exclusion of African American male students. Duncan described prolific stories of African American males experiencing relentless negative accounts, racial comments, double-standards, and bias academic opportunities. Whereas the school could have potentially reversed marginalization and exclusionary practices if addressed vigorously, teachers, peers, and administrators chose to view multiple disciplinary actions and negative academic achievement of African American males as predictable, unfortunate outcomes of a reasonably fair school opportunity. Duncan (2010) concluded his study by understanding this urban high school's view of African American

male values and attitudes as set apart and distorted from other students. Marginalization and factors such as poverty, self-efficacy, and school belonging are contrived through Duncan's study as pivotal points that effect change in the culture of oppressed schooling experiences and are acknowledged by schools as African American males own doing (Duncan, 2010).

Delgado (1996) & Lyotard (1988) impute oppression as conflict occurring between unequal social groups when the predominant group tends to disregard, marginalize, or not understand the interpretation of events as seen by the subjugated group. Oppression is defined here as powerless and cultural imperialism that informs certain groups' inability to express themselves in their terms and be heard in socially recognized ways (Delgado, 1996; Lyotard, 1988).

African American male adolescents have made minimal academic progress in past years, as evidenced by local, state, and nationwide data. College and career opportunities are lessening, and successful stability is becoming a dim light. In our present time, because of COVID-19, students have been forced to attend school in a virtual learning environment. While this has made learning difficult for students in general, learning gaps and deficits for African American males are suggested to grow in impoverished neighborhoods and low socio-economic communities (Slay, 2020). Living in low-income urban environments has been found to have a direct effect on African American males' educational attitudes as it has been demonstrated students' educational attitudes are more unenthusiastic as opposed to middle- and upper-income neighborhoods (Pruitt et al., 2019). Students who reside in low-income areas present a greater percentage of attending schools located within those same neighborhoods. In most cases, lack of sufficient

shelter, limited funding for city repairs and high percentages of high unemployment effect schools' physical and educational conditions, resulting in inadequate schools and low academic performance (Pruitt et al., 2019).

Poverty

African Americans are at increased odds of living in communities characterized by concentrated poverty that includes elevated levels of economic disadvantage, unemployment, crime, violence, and single-parent, female-headed households (Sharkey & Sampson, 2015). African American families tend to meet guidelines considered for poverty as defined by the Office of Management and Budget (OBM, 2020), indicating income does not adequately afford shelter, food, essential resources, or clothing (Jensen, 2009).

Poverty has also been identified as having an adverse effect on the academic attainment of African American children (Hunter, 2012; American Psychological Association, 2020). Children from low income or poverty status families have much lower math and literacy skills than children from high-income families (Sattler & Gershoff, 2018). Kunjufu (2011) suggest poverty and underdeveloped readiness skills explain why African American children come to school lagging in meeting academic expectations more than any other ethnic group. More specifically, African American adolescent males living in poor neighborhoods tend to experience under-funded school resources that would substantiate academic attainment (American Psychological Association, 2008; Payne & Slocomb, 2011).

Barbarin (2010) & Noguera (2008) identify three factors that impute African American males' underachievement. Of those three factors, poverty has been shown as

one of the predeterminant factors that link academic issues to poverty-stricken experiences. Kuhnhenn (2013) noted that poverty is real, and lack of resources can affect every entity of life for those who suffer from this standing.

According to Payne (2009), poverty has been classified into two categories. The first being generational poverty, which is defined as poverty extending over two generations within a single-family. The second is situational poverty whereby situations, caused by a range of factors place households at or below the poverty level. Critical race theorists emphasize the importance of understanding poverty when identifying racial demographics particularly for understanding groups of students who benefit the most from educational resources. Ladson-Billings (2006) poses situational poverty in tandem with school attendance rates, tests scores, and graduation rates to help illustrate how resources were used, for whom, and why so many African American students are not privy to such resources. The researcher will therefore refer to poverty as situational poverty for this research study.

In a longitudinal study conducted by Gaddis & Lauen (2014), researchers posed questionable concerns if the educational policies in elementary and middle school reduce achievement gaps and inequality by focusing on within school process, school accountability, rather than between school-processes such as the distribution of resources. This study analyzed how schools responded to the pressure to eliminate gaps and how race and poverty influenced responses. Researchers wanted to know if African American sub-group accountability pressure differed by school racial and poverty composition and if accountability pressure would narrow black-white achievement gaps in math and reading.

Gaddis & Lauen (2014) found that schools with the lowest percentage of poor students and the lowest white poverty ratios have the most extensive overall accountability effects on the black-white math test gaps. Schools with the lowest white poverty ratios were also shown to have large accountability (positive academic outcomes) on the black-white reading gaps. However, when researchers adjusted for different data marks of black-white gaps, the differential school poverty results for math remained significant.

The significance between schools based on the poverty ratio revealed that students who were able to attend more affluent schools could close the black-white math gap. Thus, poverty is a factor in the location and academic experiences students receive. However, reading was found to require more focused attention toward individual students' needs, requiring schools to have additional resources. Findings are in coherence with historical research from the Coleman Report (1966), echoing "social composition of the student body is more highly related to achievement, independent of the student's social background, than is any other school factor" (p. 325).

Poverty has been used to explain African American students' failures in comprehending and struggling in school systems. Ladson-Billings (2017) connotes one of the discourses of failing urban schools is that children who attend come from a "culture of poverty," which is defined as children, families, and communities being so maladjusted, they cannot operate in mainstream society. Ladson Billings (2017) finds the culture of poverty distressing, primarily due to cultural distortion, and exonerates social structures, governmental and institutional obligations for the vulnerabilities that poor children relentlessly face.

Payne (2005), unlike Gaddis & Lauen (2014), did not adhere to the notion of poverty being a factor in learning as he argues that poor children only need to be taught and give in to middle-class norms to overcome their deference. Attempting to address and solve the unsettling disparities of urban poor children, Duckworth's (2016) research on the psychology of success explored the question "of what makes some people succeed and others fail?" Through research, three areas supported reasons students learn and achieve. Duckworth (2016) identified these three areas as persistence, passion, and grit. Grit was defined as one's potential to stick it out when faced with challenges and that poor, urban children can rise above their circumstances by developing "grit." In a non-conventional manner, Duckworth (2016) explains grit as an intrinsic process of getting things done despite all odds through interest, practice, purpose, and hope. Ladson-Billings (2017) finds grit has no correlation to children living in poverty, thus explaining poverty is a social condition created by the decision of the powerful who determine who lives where, access to which schools, jobs, and level of policing to represent political order, which is categorized as structural inequity, not components of culture. Critical race theorists contend that schools serving predominately African American students face persistent inequities in the curriculum, instruction, assessment, funding, policies, and practice that oppress life chances and construct barriers that support educational inequities. However, none of these factors address a culture of poverty or grit (Ladson-Billings, 2017).

It has been documented that African Americans who experience poverty are subject to increased risks for adverse physical, social, and emotional/behavioral outcomes. Gaddis & Lauen's (2014) quantitative study revealed statistical findings that

poverty correlates with institutional inadequacies that can stifle learning opportunities for African American students who are not afforded opportunities to attend more affluent schools and are not exposed to greater learning opportunities.

Trauma

Addressing poverty alone is not a quintessential factor that reassures African American adolescent males to succeed in learning. Living in poor urban neighborhoods creates insurmountable risks for experiencing community, family, and individual traumas such as crime, gang activity, or family violence (Martin, 2015). Research shows that African American and Latino children represent 83% of urban city youth who have experienced at least one traumatic event (Martin, 2015).

Trauma is defined as a response to a distressing event that incapacitates an individual's ability to cope, in which feelings of helplessness and a range of emotions may arise. Induced forms of trauma can occur when individuals experience or are confronted with threatened death, emotional abuse, and threatened physical integrity of self or others (American Psychological Association, 2020). However, childhood trauma has been characterized as a response to adverse events or series of events that leave a child helpless and exceed the child's normal cognitive coping and defensive operations (Terr, 1991).

It has been determined that trauma impacts psychological changes to children's brains, emotional response, and behavioral response, and disturbs learning, school engagement, and academic success (McInerney & McKlindon, 2014). While brain development occurs during a child's early years, traumatic experiences such as neglect, abuse, and violence can significantly impact and limit brain development, catalyzing

cognitive loss, social delays, and emotional disorders, all of which subvert learning and creates PTSD, or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Center on Developing Child at Harvard University, 2007). In accordance, chronic stress disorder in children can have a much harsher impact on a child's learning ability and language development.

In 2012, Goodman et al. launched a longitudinal study to determine whether students from lower socio-economic backgrounds display more traumatic stress symptoms by conducting a study using a sample of fifth-grade students. The study used a national data set collected by the National Center for Education Statistics to examine a cluster of stress-related symptoms and its correlation with socio-economic status and academic achievement. Data was collected from child assessments, parent interviews, and teacher assessments, focusing specifically on fifth-grade data collection, which exhibited a sample size of 11,820 students.

Students' socio-economic status was measured through variables such as parents' occupation, education level, and household income. Traumatic stress symptoms were determined through reexperiencing, avoidance, arousal, internalizing behaviors, or externalizing behaviors. Students indicated arousal if they were having trouble paying attention or appeared to be more active than peers. Internalizing behaviors were indicated if a student appeared to be sad or lonely. Externalizing behaviors were indicated if the child fought, argued, or disturbed others.

Academic achievement was measured by observed reading achievement, mathematics achievement, and science achievement to reflect content areas taught and deemed developmentally necessary. Researchers also examined the relationship between

low ability tracking evidenced by an Individual Education Plan and disengagement (total absences) from school.

Researchers' analysis of the data concluded the percentage of students who met the traumatic stress criteria decreased as socio-economic increased. When examining academic indicators for disengagement and low-ability tracking, traumatic stress significantly lowered students' educational outcomes. Additionally, when researchers analyzed data to determine if traumatic stress played a role in reading, math, and science, data revealed students without traumatic stress average mean scale score was 142.4. In contrast, students with traumatic stress were 127.6, math mean scale scores were 116.3 for students without traumatic stress as opposed to a score of 103.0 for students with traumatic stress, and science mean scale score being 59.0 for students without traumatic stress versus students with traumatic stress 51.5. Researchers conclude findings to be statistically significant in all content areas, indicating trauma has adverse effects on academic achievement (Goodman et al., 2012).

Scholars have noted that overall mental, physical, and social well-being can be explicitly endangered for African American males (Alegria 2015; APA, 2017; Letourneau, 2011; Zakariya, 2015). McLaughlin (2014), like Goodman (2012), discovered that impoverished conditions alone do not substantiate or predict overall harm to children. Depending on the extent and number of negative factors within the environment, impoverishment compounds the ruinous effects on a child's environment.

Researchers have discovered that community violence plays an integral role in trauma for African American adolescents' mental health issues, social and peer decisions, and school issues (Voisin et al., 2016).

Voisin et al.'s (2016) year-long study examined a community comprised mostly of African American youth between 13 and 24 in urban city Chicago. The research's study was designed to address a gap between violence and co-occurring behavioral health factors and if such behaviors would be related to juvenile justice involvement and school engagement.

Researchers recruited youth from poor, impoverished communities of African American residents. The average annual income ranged from $24,049 to $35,946, well below the city's average at $43,628. The percentage of single female-headed households ranged from 28.9% to 32.3% (City Data, 2015). Youth who participated in the study were drawn from a convenience sampling in three high schools, one youth church group, two community youth programs, and four public venues frequented by youth. Of the 753 participants who were initially invited to enroll in the study, the overall response rate was 655.

Data regarding exposure to community violence was collected by the researcher using the Exposure to Violence Probe, which measures seven lifetime-frequency of witnessing or personally experiencing violent acts. Acts of violence were identified as a close relative or friend dying violently or being seriously injured, robbed, attacked, witnessing someone being beaten, being a victim of violence, or seeing a dead body in the community.

Mental health behaviors were assessed with the Brief Symptom Inventory, which contains 18 items that investigated mental health symptoms during the past seven years (Voisin et al., 2016). Researchers concluded African American youth who reported

higher rates of exposure to community violence were 2.7 times more likely to exhibit lessened cognitive abilities.

Additionally, in 2015, McCoy et al., performed a study involving urban adolescents to determine if there was a specific connection between violent crime in a low socio-economic Chicago neighborhood and children's cognitive performance and engagement. Decades of research has indicated neighborhood characteristics such as poverty, segregation, and disorder have implications for the mental development of young people (Aneshensel & Sucoff ,1996; Latkin & Curry, 2003; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Ross & Mirowksy, 2001). The study's aim centered on the hypothesis that children identified as having high levels of anxiety may be more at risk for longstanding abnormal cognitive effects than peers with low anxiety.

Data was initially collected in 2004 and 2005 from two cohorts of preschool programs comprised of 602 children, in which 83% met the necessary criteria for the study. Within the Head Start cohort, there were 35 classrooms and 18 sites chosen for the study based on high poverty and high crime sites (McCoy et al., 2015). As part of the follow-up assessment data collection in 2010 and 2011, 359 nine and ten-year-old children were drawn from the original sample equaling 60% of the original sample (McCoy et al., 2015).

Assessments took place during the school day in places where students were less likely to be disturbed. Demographic information was collected from parents, caregivers, and records of violence collected from the Chicago Police Department over two years. Crimes occurring within a half-mile and approximate residential address of the child determined whether children who participated in the study would be considered in the

treatment or control group. For researchers to determine such factors, if children assessed were exposed to violent crime(s) within a seven-day window, they would be considered the treatment group or examined group of students.

McCoy et al. (2015) assessed children's cognitive performance, emotional stimuli, and attention using a computerized dot-probe task. The computerized dot-probe was used to capture children's accuracy and latency in locating the dot on the computer screen after a brief presentation of positive, neutral, or negative images utilized from the International Affective Picture System. When possible, stimuli relevant to an urban, ethnic minority, and elementary school-aged children were selected to increase the significance of both emotional and non-emotional images.

McCoy et al.'s (2015) research concludes that community violence directly affects children's cognitive processing in ways that may expose them to a significant risk of longer-term psychological complications. Tests of simple slopes of the effect of treatment status on outcomes for children with high anxiety revealed children who exhibit high anxiety levels had a slightly faster response time and placed more attention toward positive images than children with low anxiety who placed less attention towards positive stimuli. Additionally, McCoy (et al., 2015) also found that children whose cognitive performance was assessed within one week after a violent event occurring within a half-mile of their home, were faster and less accurate in locating the position of the dot on a computer screen than those who were assessed either before or after a violent crime took place. Previous research by Fowler (2009) suggests although acute stress of witnessing violence or directly being victimized is the largest influence on children's mental health and cognition, secondhand accounts that children learn about is also associated with

severe stress disorder. Therefore, McCoy et al.'s (2015) results suggest psychological and mental demands in dealing with environmental stress may reduce children's cognitive ability to focus or complete simple tasks, leading to a faster yet error-prone way of functioning.

In addition to psychological trauma, Duncan (2010) recounts in his study African American males' experiencing racial trauma when encountering school staff and white peers. These experiences range from daily microaggressions to flagrant acts of verbal racism and stereotyping, prohibiting African American male students from being accepted and respected. Race-related trauma is an adverse interaction with institutional, symbolic, or individual acts of racism (Bennefield & Feagin, 2013). Institutional racism depicts system-level policies and schooling practices that create conditions where adolescent African American males are over-policed and overly represented in remedial educational courses (Merkwae, 2015).

Symbolic racism represents a conflict of beliefs and values between the subordinate and dominant groups (Hough & McConahay, 1976; Stewart & Tran, 2018). This type of racism captures the ideology and study of White Americans' prejudicial beliefs and discriminatory behaviors toward African Americans (Brandt & Reyna, 2012; Kinder & Sear, 1981; Hough & McConahay , 1976; Steward & Tran, 2018).

Duncan's symbolic racism findings are supported through dialogue with a white colleague who explained her disdain position when dealing with African American athletes in her classroom. "If I saw an African American male who had to duck when he entered my class, I just said 'oh no—he did not have a chance in my class. '" During another encounter, a white girl leaning over a balcony shouted into the cafeteria, asking

an African American male student, "Hey, are you joining the black male mentor program?" The white student's demeaning assumption, which portrayed there was not a positive black male in the home or family, exemplifies a racial, unsolicited comment with little regard to the offensiveness the question demonstrated.

Sue (2010) and Torino (2019) note that African Americans experience microaggressions regularly and tend to have an array of emotional, cognitive, and psychological reactions that lead to more severe health consequences. Racial trauma enacted upon African American male adolescents' school settings impacts academics, socialization, health, and self-efficacy, informing lower academic success (Hernandez, 2011; Morrissey, 2014; Zakariya, 2015).

Both quantitative and qualitative research data reveal trauma has ruinous effects on learning for all students; however, African American students tend to have a higher degree of traumatic engagement and experiences that inadvertently jeopardize academic achievement to a large degree. Thus, such experiences are constantly processed mentally and can have a direct impact on the students' behaviors, actions, personal beliefs, academic goals, and expectations of themselves (Herman, 2015).

Self-Efficacy

Bandura (1977, 1997) articulated the concept of self-efficacy as one's belief in organizing and executing action deemed necessary to complete or achieve a goal. Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy beliefs are derived from four primary sources of influence, (1) mastery experiences, (2) social role models, (3) social persuasion, and (4) emotional and psychological states. Above all, Bandura (1997) states:

> Mastery experiences are the most influential source of efficacy information because they provide the most authentic evidence of whether one can muster whatever it takes to succeed. Success builds a robust belief in one's personal efficacy. Failures undermine it, especially if failures occur before a sense of efficacy is firmly established. (p.80).

Bandura (1997) noted that self-efficacy is positively related to academic achievement. Like Hackett & Betz (1981), other researchers indicate self-efficacy might be of significant value in influencing achievement behavior and academic decision-making. Additional findings connote students who believe they can perform academic tasks endure longer, take on more challenging and difficult tasks, and use more cognitive strategies than students who are unsure of their abilities (Brown et al., 1991). Research has shown that self-efficacy perceptions are good predictors of general performances, such as students' grades (Bandura, 1993). Zimmerman, Martinez-Pons, & Bandura (1992) conducted a study to analyze if students' self-regulatory efficacy would influence their perceived self-efficacy for academic achievement and grade achievement. Researchers chose two large urban Eastern city high schools comprised of ninth and tenth graders who would be willing to engage in a full semester study. Students representative of the study encompassed 50 boys and 52 girls as participants who also represented a sample population of lower-middle-class neighborhoods. Race relations represented 17% Asian, 34% Black, 23% Hispanic, and 24% White. Social studies class was the primary subject, mainly because the course was required for all students and not academically tracked according to ability, thus providing a general representation of all students attending the school. They utilized a Self-efficacy for Academic Achievement Scale composed of nine core subjects that measured students' perception of their capabilities to achieve in subject areas. Using a five-grade-level scale aligned with percentages,

students rated their highest goal expectation and the lowest grade they would find reasonable for each subject area. At the beginning of the semester, teachers administered questionnaires for goal setting, self-efficacy, and requested demographical information during students' social studies block.

At the end of the semester, teachers reported their final grades and prior year grades of participants to indicate the most recent academic achievement specific to social studies to measure the most relevant previous academic experience that could influence students' perception of their efficacy goal setting.

According to researchers, personal goals played a crucial role in students' attainment of school grades. These self-set goals committed the students to specific grade achievements for positive self-evaluation. In the study's conclusion, researchers support self-efficacy influenced students' academic goals for themselves and their achievement. Hence, as suggested by researchers, academic self-efficacy is predictive of students' ability to succeed and reveals students who possess higher academic self-efficacy work harder (Bandura, et al., 1992, Bandura, 2001).

Researchers Uwah et al. (2008) suggests that perceptions of students feeling a sense of belonging and academic self-efficacy are related to academic achievement; however, there is little known about the specifics of the interconnectedness of those relationships, and no study has attempted to look at those constructs with African American males.

These researchers examined African American high school males' perceptions and if indicators of educational aspirations would positively predict academic self-efficacy scores. The study was conducted at a relatively small high school located in the

Southeastern part of a large urban city. The school was designed to enroll a smaller percentage of students to foster a sense of community. Of students attending, 95% of students were African American and 80% free-reduced lunch. Participants in the study were enrolled as ninth and tenth graders ranging from 14 to 16. There were 11 ninth-graders and 29 tenth-graders.

Students selected for the study were initially asked to complete a demographic questionnaire, which consists of seven self-report questions to include grade, race, sex, family income, year in school, mother's educational level, and student educational aspiration ranging from doctoral degree to high school diploma.

Additionally, students' responses were analyzed in terms of academic self-efficacy using an adaptive model of Bachman's (1970) Self-Efficacy Scale. The scale measured eight items, three of which were questions such as, " How do you rate yourself in school ability compared with those in your grade at school?"; "How intelligent do you think you are compared to others your age?"; and "How capable do you think you are of getting a good grade?" A Likert scale was used to score items from 1= far below average to 5= very much above average.

Data collected using a PSSM scale calculated 10% of students expected to earn a high school diploma, 7.5% expected to earn a bachelor's degree, 60% expected to earn a master's degree, while 22.5% expected to earn a doctoral degree. Regarding the Academic Self-Efficacy Scale, students scored above the 3.0 mid-average point scale, indicating a relatively high perception of academic self-efficacy (Uway et al., 2008). These findings are in line with previous research suggesting that self-efficacy plays a

more significant role in academic achievement than either self-concept or self-esteem (Johnson-Reid, 2005).

In 2019, Brooms conducted a qualitative research study that examines 550 African American students enrolled in an all-male Title 1 public charter secondary school, centrally located in a large urban city. The researcher aimed to understand how African American male students understood and articulated their educational experiences. The target population of participants consisted of African American males who all enrolled from the same public-charter school and lived in the same urban city where two-thirds of students lived in low-income households.

The researcher invited 45 potential candidates into the study, 32 expressed interest in participating; however, 20 students were secured for the study given the invites' availability and responsiveness. Data collection consists of interviews with students under a phenomenological methodological approach to collect participants' stories and their ideal paths to college and beyond. Due to the study's length and completion of data analysis, participants were between ages 20-23 and had graduated from high school before the researcher concluded the findings.

Finding from the research engenders various reasons why students enrolled in the school, as some felt pressured by family members while others entered trying to understand better what school was about. The school climate and environment based on student experiences were inviting, uplifting, and instilled a sense of pride in students' work and worth.

Additionally, students felt a welcoming and supportive atmosphere that increased students' beliefs in themselves, self-efficacy, and robust teacher relationships.

Broom (2019) emphasizes that the study's findings are important for parents and educational stakeholders to consider for improving student performance, especially in large urban schools. Students found that school culture and their sense of belonging were influential in making them feel valued and affirmed, hence providing future academic opportunities for success.

Research studies have shown the interconnectedness of self-efficacy and how students relate academic achievement, trajectories in academic goal setting, and collegial aspirations to what they perceive about themselves and their ability to succeed. Researchers posit statistical and qualitative outcomes in understanding the role and significance self-efficacy has on student success. Although research studies were drawn from varying contexts to examine the effects of self-efficacy, research data contends a strong correlation between African American students' belief in what they can academically achieve and what is achieved.

School Belonging

Motivational beliefs and values are suggested to be influenced by socio-cultural environments where students develop and pursue educational aspirations and goals. Research has attempted to connect chronic school failures among African American males to low expectations and negative academic self-beliefs (Graham, 1994). Research connotes members of ethnic groups are potentially victimized by racial discrimination and hostile cultural stereotypes that affect self-efficacy and can damage achievement values (Major et al., 2002; Steele & Aronson, 1998). Cultural mistrust between African American male adolescents and the school system can have negative implications for academic achievement. F. Terrell & Terrell (1981) describe cultural mistrust as a

construct to explain African American's distrust of Whites in institutional, personal, or social contexts. Ogbu (1991) contends African Americans with high levels of cultural mistrust will therefore expect that members or institutions of the dominant culture will not treat them fairly. It has been suggested that African American families and communities view structural grounds like schools and political barriers as reasons students receive deficient schooling instruction and neglect (Gadsen et al., 1996). Such communities believe schools inadequately prepare their children socially and academically, providing minimal opportunities for students to have positive life outcomes (Howard, 2013; Irving & Hudley, 2005). Irving & Hudley (2005) conducted a study to measure the relationship between cultural mistrust, academic achievement values, and academic outcome expectations among African American high school students.

Participants in the study attended an urban Southern California high school where 75 African American males were equally represented across grade bands 9-12. Residential neighborhoods surrounding the high school constitute lower-middle to lower-class in which African American homes make up 23% of the demographics (U.S. Census Bureau, 1990).

Cultural mistrust was assessed using a modified version of The Cultural Mistrust Inventory (CMI). The inventory measure was used to assess a variance of 48 items listed to determine what degree African American males trust Whites, institutions, and Whites' intentions and actions. The instrument was later adapted to measure outcome expectations and outcome value and renamed the African American Career Outcome Expectancy Inventory (Irving, 2002).

The first section of the study lists ten questions that measured students' expected outcomes after graduating from high school. Outcomes include income status, prestige, strong ethnic identity, and the ability to avoid racial discrimination. The second section asks students how much they value those same outcomes. All responses were scored on a 10-point scale ranging from very important to very unlikely.

The study suggests that for those 75 African American males, cultural mistrust was negatively correlated to both outcome expectations and values. Data derived from the findings suggest that when African American male students identify structural racism, they will not expect to control access to the opportunity structure, regardless of their academic efforts. Students may devalue academic accomplishments and academic desires primarily because they do not expect academic achievement to produce personal benefits (Irving & Hardley, 2005).

According to the quantitative data outcomes, it has conclusively been noted that rather than risk feeling incompetent, students will discount the academic institution as a place to achieve success in favor of other areas where they can feel valued and sense of belonging (Irving & Hardley, 2005).

Mary et al. (2018) conducted a longitudinal study to address what factors facilitate or hinder African American students' early academic success. Of the three questions posed, one question sought to understand how African American adolescents describe their academic achievement.

Candidates were recruited from four public housing neighborhoods in a large Western city. According to the local housing authority, 52% of families experienced extreme poverty. Participants selected encompassed 14 fourth and fifth-grade students

and 11 sixth, seventh, and eighth-grade students. Of the 25 students involved in the study, 64% were African American males.

Findings from this study indicated elementary students begin developing a perceived imbalance of power between themselves, their teachers, peers, and schools well before entering high school years (Mary et al., 2018). Although questions from the study did not specifically address race issues, both elementary and middle school participants frequently identified racial inequities as barriers that negated their learning. Researchers were not surprised participants stressed how teachers held inherent beliefs over perceived gaps in educational attainment for African American students. It was further suggested that African American students (males) perceive and encounter negative perceptions and stereotypes surrounding their academic potential and opportunities are grounded in race, socio-economic status, and environment (Mary et al., 2018).

Research has shown that while a sense of belonging is important for all children, it has been suggested that African American male adolescents face more difficulties and challenges in school and classroom inclusivity due to living in neighborhoods characterized by high levels of poverty and racism (Mary et al., 2018).

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this literature review was set as a premise to support long-lived bodies of research that confirm factors such as poverty, trauma, self-efficacy, and school belonging have all played an integral yet inverse correlation in the lives of African American males and schooling experiences. While previous research suggests self-efficacy may have a moderate effect on students' academic outcomes, the results are less than satisfactory when considering African American males' attending public schools.

The aim of this study intends to explore the phenomenon of African American male adolescent perceptions of fourth-grade adolescent males feeling connected or disconnected to classroom learning experiences.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) focuses on the role of "voice" in bringing additional power to the legal discourses of racial justice by interjecting minority cultural viewpoints stemming from a history of oppression as efforts to reconstruct a society crumbling under the burden of racial dominancy (Barnes, 1990).

Chapter 3 will present the research design and explain why it is used for this study. Qualitative phenomenological methods will be used to analyze African American male adolescents' schooling experiences. The following chapter contains the rationale, research design, participant selection, and data collection as mechanisms used by the researcher to add to the existing body of literature and gain a more current lens to the disparaging problems this group of students encumbers in classrooms today.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

This study aimed to engage African American adolescents to share their personal experiences in an urban elementary school; hear their voices, perspectives, and stories of what has led them to feel connected and disconnected in their learning process. The overall purpose of the research study sought to answer the following questions:

RQ1: What are the perspectives of African American adolescents and their experiences in urban schools?

RQ2: How and when do they feel connected (valued) and disconnected (marginalized) from classroom learning?

Hermeneutic Phenomenological Qualitative Research and Design

Phenomenology, according to Barbera & Inciarte (2012), connotes the term was originated from the Greek word phainomenon, which means "something that shows itself, and manifests that it can become visible by itself" (p. 201). Guillen (2019) insisted that phenomenology is a science of consciousness rather than empirical things and explains that consciousness treated as an object limits human subjectivity as the foundation of scientific knowledge. In opposition to naturalism, which is designed to observe the individual and remove the observer's intentionality and intuition, phenomenology focuses on how individuals understand lived experiences (Latorre, 1996). Primarily, this approach "is to understand the phenomenon is part of a significant whole and there is no possibility of analyzing it without the holistic approach concerning the experience to which it belongs" (Guillen, 2019).

The role of the researcher seeks to gain an understanding for African American males through the lens of participants. The research data ensued from phenomenological research are specific, narrative accounts by participants regarding their stories, events, and encounters about the study's subject (Lopez & Willis 2004). The researcher's intent was to understand the participant's views and past experiences as described by the participant and capture detailed descriptions.

Phenomenological Research & Education

Van Manen (2003) refers to phenomenology in education "as an approach to the study of pedagogy that is not limited to offering simple "alternative" descriptions or explanations of the educational phenomena, but rather the human sciences focusing reflexively on our pedagogical concerns with students" (p. 189). Phenomenological research is befitting to support this research's intended aim primarily because it provides a way to capture experiential essences of what the world is like and how it can be known for African American males' and their schooling phenomena (Berrios, 1989). San Martin (1986) suggests relevance of phenomenological hermeneutics and education as:

> the relationship between phenomenology and education is established on the notion of "sense"; considering that education is the transmission from society to its members regarding the sense that a culture has given to its relationship in the world. (p. 222).

This method represents a systematic yet strict approach to analyzing everyday pedagogy's ethical, relational, and practical facets, difficult to access through other research methods (Guillen, 2019). As the researcher in this phenomenological study, it was vital to collect experiences and reflective analysis of meaning from participants to be

properly examined and interpreted. Van Manen (2003) refers to this type of methodological process as hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics

The evolution of hermeneutic phenomenology was developed by Martin Heidegger primarily due to previous scholars' rejection of suspending opinion and allowance of interpretive narration to the researcher's description. Hermeneutics is the theory and practice of interpretation and is designed to focus on individuals' or groups' subjective experiences while attempting to uncover the subject's experiences through their life's stories (Kafle, 2011; van Manen, 1994). Experiential data collected from the descriptions of lived experiences were collected through focus-group interviews, written responses, field notes, and classroom observations.

A hermeneutic study's utility orients' personal opinions to construct a lucid description based on interpretive narration; therefore, the researchers must provide interpretations that represent subjective human experiences as participants are telling them. By analyzing collected data, the researcher has uncovered recurrent themes shared by the participants to gain knowledge and understanding of the lived experiences through a particular phenomenon or life experience.

Hermeneutical Phenomenology

Phenomenology emphasizes that the world is lived by a person, not the world, as something separate from the person (Valle, 1989). "What is this experience like?" is the proposed question phenomenology attempts to unfold through the meaning of everyday existence (van Manen, 1997). According to Husserl (1970), phenomenology views such a method as a way of reaching true meaning through piercing deeply into reality.

The hermeneutic method developed an approach to which the researcher is concerned with the life or human experience as it is lived. The primary goal is to capture details foreseen as trivial aspects within experiences that may be taken for everyday general acts or encounters (Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991). Heidegger's (1962) suggests that all understanding is connected to a set of relations between parts that cannot be eliminated; therefore, one must become aware and account for interpretive influences.

Hermeneutic phenomenology methods have specific characteristics that define both, (1) Phenomenology and (2) Hermeneutic methods for their view of lived experiences. Phenomenology (descriptive) is concerned with life or human experience; however, phenomenology focuses on understanding phenomena and organizing principles that give form and meaning to the life world. Hermeneutic (interpretive) focuses on the historical meanings of experience, development, and progressive effects on individual and social levels (Kvale, 1996; Osborne, 2004; Polkinghorne, 1983).

Procedures & Data Collection

Data collected in this research study afforded the researcher a feasible way to obtain students' thoughts and emotions from focus group interview questions and classroom observations. Such data was captured from the researcher's field notes, student voice recordings, transcriptions, and student-written responses to glean a more in-depth understanding of African American adolescent male students' school phenomenon.

Participants and Setting

Based on state documents, this study's target population was elementary schools identified as having 25% or more African American students. For the sake of this qualitative research study, the purposeful sampling technique helped to identify and

select the information that contains a level of depth and identified selective individuals that are knowledgeable or have experienced the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling allows access to key informants in the field who can help identify information-rich cases in which one can learn a great deal concerning issues and the central importance of the purpose of the research (Patton, 1990). This research study aimed to identify African American male students who have experienced urban schooling since kindergarten and are currently enrolled as fourth-grade students.

From a list of surrounding school districts that contained the desired population of African American students, appeals were sent to seven school board districts requesting permission to conduct the present study. Declinations from six districts ranged from lack of interest from districts due to the sensitivity and nature of the study, and lack of principal agreement for the conduction of study presumably in fear of the school and students being identified.

Out of the exhausting list of school districts and declinations, one school principal was willing to grant permission based on the present study's potential to unfold new learning about African American fourth-grade males' academic plight and ways to better support their learning and academic outcomes.

Participant Sampling

The researcher met with the school principal to discuss the procedure for data and request assistance in selecting fourth-grade teachers who would have students in their classroom that met the criteria for the study. Thereafter, the principal agreed to allow the researcher to meet with two fourth-grade teachers to explain the premise of the research, process, and duration of the study. The researcher also explained the primary role and

positionality in the role of the researcher during classroom observations as well as focus group interviews. With full consent from the principal and teachers, the researcher then provided teachers' parental consent and child assent forms to students and parents of potential candidates. Such forms were provided to teachers with a one-week turnaround period for potential candidates and parents interested in the study and willing to allow student participation.

Shortly after the week had passed, one fourth-grade teacher notified via email that there were no prospective candidates for the study. Neither of the two fourth-grade teachers had received approved child assent nor parental consent forms. The researcher notified the principal concerning the lack of participants and jeopardy of the study moving forward. As a next step of support, the principal extended an opportunity for the researcher to speak with parents during an open house for fourth-grade students and parents to explain the nature of the present study, but the effort was not afforded as parents of the targeted population did not attend.

The principal then decided to contact parents of eight fourth-grade African American families, many of whom he had known for years and had developed relationships. Of the eight phone calls made, one parent was willing to listen to the purpose of the study but was unsure and decided to allow his wife to make the decision. Two families did not answer, nor did they return the principal's call; one grandmother became angered in saying she did not want her grandson identified as black in a research study, and one parent declined on the phone and returned the declined parental consent form. As a result, the principal successfully spoke to three families and gained assent and consent forms to participate in the present study.

Once participants were approved to participate in the study, the researcher created pseudonyms for the school, substitute teacher, and participants. The researcher visited the classroom one week before attempting to collect data. This strategy aimed to lessen anxiousness or tension for participants, create a level of familiarity with the researcher, and transition into the study more comfortably.

According to Conroy & Harcourt (2009), it would be groundless for interviews and observation to begin without children feeling comfortable with the researcher well before the study takes place. Thus, observing children in their settings was imperative before interviews and observations could begin (Danby et al., 2011). Likewise, Brinkman & Kvale (2015) suggest that the researcher set the stage for a qualitative interview by listening, displaying an interest in what is being communicated, express understanding, and showing respect. Danby (2002, 2009) acknowledges the competence of students as interpreters of their everyday world; therefore, the researcher's role is to better understand through observation how students interact daily and what is important for them in their school and community.

Interviews

An in-depth, open-ended interview focuses on delving deeply into experiences with a few key questions and areas the researcher addressed during the interview (Bhattacharya, 2017). Questions should gradually expand the horizon of the topic, or on the contrary, narrow and concretize it (Zeleeva, 2019). The central idea was for the researcher to pose questions that permit participants to actualize their personal experiences.

Punch (2002) suggests that when constructing interview questions with children, the use of language and vocabulary should be clear and precise. Therefore, posing straightforward questions with simple, kid-friendly language was critical to collecting data from the study.

Spradley's (1979) approach to qualitative interview questions supports the novice researcher in framing questions suitable for the study participants. Questions for the foci of the present research study consist of the types of questions listed below:

- Descriptive – Questions that generate conversation about a specific incident

- Grand Tour- Participants offer details about their everyday experiences

- Example – Participants address experiences in general or abstract terms

- Contrasting – Questions to disprove notable findings in the participant's experience or challenge the researchers' subjectivity.

Much of Spradley's work is supported by Rubin & Rubin (2012) as they posit that initial interview questions are identified as tour questions to introduce the topic(s) to the interviewee. Also, questions should be broad enough not to limit or bias the participant's response. The overall goal was to capture detailed accounts of the participant's perceptions of their experiences that the researcher could use to address and answer research questions (Roberts, 2020).

As students were observed in their natural classroom setting, weekly focus group interviews consisting of 34 began. Each session began with participants being face-to-face with the researcher in a private setting in the conference room or an empty classroom. A series of questions were asked during each interview session that gradually led to more personal, in-depth questions as the study continued. Interviews occurred on

school grounds that were audio-taped and transcribed using the Temi transcription database. Debriefing summary forms were provided to students during the last focus group session to confirm student statements and consent to use student dialogue data in research study.

Focus Groups

The focus group method described by Belanovsky (1993, 2001a, 2001b), Buber (1947), Dmitriyeva (1999), Folomeeva (2001, 2003, 2011), Folomeeva & Bogomolva (1996), Folomeeva, Bogomolova & Melnikova (1995), Giorgi, A. & Giorgi B. (2003) as an in-depth interview process in which participants answer questions asked by the researcher to address personal experiences, and perceptions to the researcher. Participants were placed in focus group interview sessions to answer questions about their schooling experience and whether factors outside of school impacted those experiences. The purpose in exchange of dialogue is not so much of participants' opinion, but rather their attitude towards the relevance of the subject (Zeleeva, 2019). Additionally, focus group participants are found to share similarities in backgrounds, characteristics, or experiences that support paradigms such as Critical Race Theory (Hatch et al., 2002). Morgan (1997) states, "the hallmark of focus groups is their explicit use of group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group" (p.2).

Zeleeva (2019) posits while this method has been used previously for students to discuss psychological and pedagogical problems within a group to address students' position and attitude on the topics of study, focus groups are found suitable as an informed approach in qualitative studies.

As participants begin the initial phase of the focus group interview process, research suggests the researcher begin with short interview questions that build over time that are best suited for young participants (Garbarino & Scott, 1992). The researcher was fully aware that some participants' responses elicited sensitive feelings and increased participants' probability of displaying emotion.

Field Notes/Observations

Field notes, or historically referred to as "scratch notes," have been a vital part of qualitative research since the 1900s, emanating in the field of ethnographic anthropology (Emerson et al., 2011). Initially, field notes were thought to be used for researchers to scribe their ideas or personal thoughts; however, it is currently understood that qualitative field notes are currently an essential component of punctilious qualitative research. Such notes serve as a method to enhance data and provide a rich context for analysis (Creswell, 2013; Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2005; Muhall, 2003; Patton, 2002). Accordingly, field notes place qualitative studies within a broader societal and world-wide context. They provide a means to serve as information about focus group interviews and observations to support participant meaning and the researcher's interpretation (Lauderdale & Phillippi, 2018). Moreover, field notes are designed to capture non-textual or auditory information about focus groups, interviews with the researcher as a path to gain participant meaning (Lauderdale & Phillippi, 2018).

Field notes were an integral part of the researchers' data entity to capture gestures, physical expressions, and physical posture/body movements during interview sessions to be collected and added to the body of data analysis. The researcher engaged in six 45-minute classroom observations that subsequently occurred after focus group interview

sessions. This process allowed the researcher to observe students in their natural classroom setting as they interact with peers and teacher(s). The researcher recorded field notes to capture actions and dialogue to support follow-up questions during subsequent interview sessions.

Student Written Responses

Pre-and post-student written response questions served as a data instrument at the beginning and end of the study. The study and use of artifacts are deemed purposeful in revealing the products that make up our material culture or what is taking place in the world and the world made up of individual selves. Research has shown artifacts as a valuable source in providing evidence of teaching and learning (Allender & Manke, 2004). This instrument's utility served as a layer of data collection for understanding the phenomena students experience. The researcher posed the following questions to record student written responses:

What are your thoughts about sharing your personal learning experiences among peers?

In your opinion, how has sharing in the focus group sessions shaped your learning experiences?

Data Analysis

Independent data analysis requires the researcher to analyze large amounts of data sets that requires time and effort to gain a conceptual understanding of the phenomena that has occurred. However, collaboration of data analysis has been known to provide richer consensus in data findings stemming from a deeper layer of iteration to analyze meaning, create themes, and draw conclusions (Olson et al., 2016). In 1967, (Glaser and

Strauss) constituted grounded theory, a qualitative research method developed used as a systematic approach to review participant views collected from experience in order to allow patterns and themes to emerge over multiple passes through data.

Strauss (1987) imposed on this method of data analysis by creating the constant comparative method. The constant comparative method is commonly described as a linear iterative process and the personal perspectives of researchers' impact to make relevant connections in the data that enhance the value of the qualitative analysis. Constant comparative suggests the researchers develop codes while reviewing transcripts or other verbatim data to identify constructs while comparing texts identified with the same code to ensure they were representative of the same construct. Connections made between the constructs are described as patters and rationalizations drawn from codes of data that emerge from patterns and are then described as themes. The coding process provides a line-by-line examination of text to identify codes in order to reach a level of saturation needed to lessen the potential risk of missing important concepts that are critical to the analysis (Holton, 2010).

Critical Race Theory and qualitative research illustrate ways counter narratives are used as methodology and as a theory in and of itself to analytically and conceptually frame a study (Vaught, 2011). More specific areas of CRT are referred to as methodological complexity which is based on scholarship that calls attention to categorization and the workings of intra-categorical complexity in which the researcher problematizes implications of the categorization and then attending to narratives that represent who and how people are (Nash, 2008).

Narrative data were then coded to categorize interview questions into one of the four themes emerged from the literature review. The researcher and faculty advisor analyzed responses to the 28 questions to match questions with one of the four themes. Initially, the two coders independently read through the data multiple times and identified matching questions to themes. A second layer of analysis allowed the two coders to read through all data again, but this time, as a collaborative team. Through an ongoing discussion and re-reading, data were delineated by jointly considering potential category names. In the third layer of qualitative analysis, the two coders, as a team, reviewed participants' narratives and read to assign category names. The two coders considered their earlier impressions and before a final determination of category names, discussed the rationale for the initial choice. In the fourth layer of analysis, the two coders, identified text examples that most closely define the category labels. In this way, using the data, the participants' comments named the categories. For the fifth layer of analysis, each coder reviewed their individual notes as compared with participant comments. For the final layer of analysis, the two researchers checked with one another for any inconsistent data associated with the categories. Additionally, pre- and post- student written responses were examined. Responses exhibited improper grammar, syntax errors, and errors in spelling, indicating academic struggles were prevalent.

Research Questions

Hatch (2002) suggests upon completion of data analysis, the researcher revisits terms, relationships, and other possible ways to organize and make sense of what the data

reveals. He also contends data can be categorized based on domains, subdomains, and themes that have connections to each other and will help the researcher create a comprehensive representation of how the overall analysis fits together.

Data sets were coded for sentences, phrases, and words until the point of saturation aligning to poverty, trauma, self-efficacy, and school-belonging in the participant's lived experiences of school life. Additionally, journal reflections (field notes) were extracted based on two individuals independently and conjointly reading and analyzing data points. In this study, themes were aligned across patterns of data to answer the following research questions:

RQ 1. What are the perspectives of African American male adolescents and their experiences in urban schools?

RQ 2. How and when do they feel (valued) and disconnected (marginalized) from classroom learning?

Of the 28 open-ended questions presented to participants, the researcher used the constant comparative method to support questions 1,3,4,21, and 23 to align with RQ 1. theme for self-efficacy. This theme indicates how African American males viewed themselves and their academic attainment. Questions (Q2, Q5, Q7, Q9, Q16, Q20, Q26, Q27) were also analyzed and supportive of this theme.

Likewise, the researcher identified and aligned questions 6,8,12, and 15 to RQ 2 which supports the theme of school belonging, a variable that can hinder African American males' schooling experiences. The following additional questions (Q10, Q11, Q17, Q19,) were also aligned to support the theme of school belonging.

Table 3

Alignment of Research Questions to Interview Questions

Research Questions	Interview Questions
Self-Efficacy What are the perspectives of African American Adolescents and their experiences in urban schools?	1. What are your feelings about school? 3. What experiences have made you feel this way? 4. Have you always felt this way? 21. When you come to school every day, do you walk away with having learned something that was valuable to you? 23. What are you most proud of about your learning experiences? What do your grades mean to you and your future?
School Belonging How and when do they feel connected (valued) and disconnected (marginalized) from classroom learning?	6. How would you describe your experiences with your teachers? 8. While observing you in math class, what led you to either participate or withdraw from your math lesson? 12. Do you think your classmates affect your behavior? Would you say positive or negative? 15. How do you think being an African American male has impacted your learning?

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Trustworthiness and integrity of research are categorized into criteria according to

qualitative research. Guba & Lincoln (1985) suggest that establishing trustworthiness is

one of the more dominant ways of engaging in member checks. Member checks consist

of the researcher following up with participants to confirm the participant's intended

meanings (Guba & Lincoln 1985; Patton, 2002). Member checks provide several

advantages to both the researcher and participants by first offering a chance to detect the

researcher's personal biases by seeking additional points of view when analyzing data

(Guba & Lincoln 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Secondly, member checks support the researcher's ethical obligation to maintain accurate accounts of participants' lived experiences (Fossey et al., 2002). Thirdly, it serves as a way for the researcher to gather additional details to address gaps in information or areas where confusion may lie (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Lastly, member checks enhance participant engagement and understanding of the phenomenon (Patton, 2008). The overarching design of member checks creates flexibility to allow the researcher to apply continuously or at the end of data collection to analyze pivotal points for establishing trustworthiness in the findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1982).

When seeking data from children, Shenton (2002) suggests that specific strategies are imperative when undertaking qualitative research. The researcher aimed to utilize focus group interview questions and follow-up questions derived from classroom observations to understand African American adolescents' perspective and their experiences with learning. Participants were provided a debriefing form to ensure accuracy of transcriptions collected and if the researcher had participant(s) consent to use data as part of the study as this is vital to the rigor and integrity of detailed, accurate accounts of participants' lived experiences.

Limitations

In an attempt to discover how African American adolescent male students sense connection or disconnection to classroom learning experiences, this study has several limitations that should be considered.

- The study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic which exacerbated learning for students in general, however learning gaps and academic deficits for

African American males were suggested to grow in impoverished areas and low socio-economic communities (Slay, 2020).

- Research may also be limited based on participant responses during their interviews. One of three participants engaged more in responding to questions than his peers.

- The present study aimed to hear student perspectives of their schooling experiences and possible factors outside of school that could contribute to their phenomenon; however, perspectives of teachers, principal, and community members were not considered.

- Due to age and maturity, students' ability in responding to interview questions were limited.

Transferability

Guba & Lincoln (1985) & Firestone (1993) describe transferability as the researcher's responsibility to ensure accurate contextual information about fieldwork sites, which allows the reader to make a transfer. As the researcher, a dense description of the hermeneutic phenomenon investigated has been provided to help readers have a clear understanding of what is happening and allowance to compare the phenomenon described with research after the study. Transferability becomes an intricate part of the research as it refers to the degree of which the results of qualitative research can be transferred to other contexts with other respondents (Bitsch, 2005; Tobin & Begley, 2004). The researcher's role was to obtain the perceptions of participants in developing the conclusion of the study by using background information, data collection methods,

transcripts, and data analysis and research findings from the study to provide a detailed description of the inquiry and participants that were selected.

Consistency

Reliability is referred to as the soundness of the research and addresses the question of consistency within the methodological process (Johnson & Rose, 2020). Although researchers have scrutinized reliability used in qualitative research in past years, arguing if works are repeated in the same context, using the same methods and same participants, similar results would be not be obtained as the phenomena will have changed. In contrast, Creswell (2013) views reliability as consistency and clarity associated with the actual conduct of the research, thereby increasing opportunities for other researchers to undertake many of research methods. Reliability was ascertained through focus group interviews and classroom observations as an overlapping method to safeguard credibility and reliability.

Confirmability

Confirmability is difficult for the researcher's objectivity because questions designed are from the researcher with unavoidable biases. Battacharya (2017) emphasizes steps that must be taken to ensure the work findings are the participants' experiences in the study rather than the researcher. Audit trails are highly suggested to allow the reader to trace the steps involved in the research process and decisions which involves an examination of the inquiry process to validate the data. Therefore, the researcher accounts for all the research decisions and activities to manifest how data is collected, recorded, and analyzed (Bowen, 2009; Li, 2004). For the present research study, cross-checking the inquiry process consist of raw data, focus group interview transcripts, field notes,

audio recordings, and student artifacts that led to informed decisions and recommendations during the study (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). Audit trails also established confirmability of the study and supported the researcher in any learned changes and explanations of findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1982; Tobin & Begley, 2004; Wallendorf & Belk, 1989).

Chapter Summary

Chapter 3 seeks to engage African American adolescents to share their personal experiences in an urban city elementary school, and to hear their voices, perspectives, and stories of what has led them to feel connected and/or disconnected in their learning process. This chapter includes a rationale for using a qualitative hermeneutical phenomenological methodology, description of the research methodology, sampling, data collection, and explication for the study.

A coding process was used for data analysis to engender common patterns and themes around fourth-grade African American adolescent males' lived experiences. The researcher's responsibility to research minor participants had to establish trustworthiness through audit trails that reveal a step-by-step of the researcher's actions and member checks to ensure data transferability is an accurate account for the narration of participants' experiences. Chapter 4 will present the study's introduction of participants, school and teacher profiles, findings from the research, and research summary.

Subjectivity Statement

Phenomenology requires researchers to first understand the study by identifying how personal experiences shape their understanding (Marshall & Rossman 1995; Patton, 1990). Unconsciously, the significance of my work in trying to understand what was

hindering African American males from academically achieving began long before admission to the doctoral program. Starting out as a second career professional, I began my teaching career in a school that enrolled mostly Hispanic and African American students. The school was located in a middle-class neighborhood where most families took great pride in their child's education. As a novice teacher, gaining traction for my students to thrive academically was most important even though I had minimal experience in the classroom. In the first two months of school, it became perfectly clear that elaborate lesson plans did not impact nor impress upon students' academic capabilities. But nothing proved this more than the results of the first formative benchmark assessment scores which indicated my students were projected to be unsuccessful on the state assessment.

After four months, a second benchmark assessment was taken. As a result, of the five third-grade classrooms, data identified the bottom tier students who were considered high-risk. Disaggregation of data permeated through teacher's classroom rosters however, most students who fell in the bottom tier (high-risk) were retained in my classroom. Data results were daunting and revealed that most failing students on the list were indeed African American males. This entire data web was perplexing in that, how could African American students, mainly, males be the lowest-performing students of any subgroup? I came to realize my students had not failed me; I had failed them. My African American boys deserved to trust and believe that together we could debunk what the data indicated. I worked relentlessly in building student-teacher relationships and academic supports that were appropriate and specific to what their individual needs

suggested. Additionally, we worked as partners to establish academic goals and instructional checkpoints to ensure students could see how they were growing as learners.

By early April, students were preparing for the state assessment that covered all major academic content areas. After three weeks, the state released a brief score report to provide schools with an indication of how students performed in subject areas. The most gratifying experience came when data exhibited over 85% of African American male students who had fallen into the high-risk category scored proficient from my classroom.

The remaining weeks before closing the school year, the literacy coach, who had been my hero, approached me and said, "If you really want to know if you can teach, go to inner-city and teach against the norm." Her words gave me chills but also piqued curiosity in thinking, what was so different about inner-city students than my present school? Later that summer, I was asked to become a fourth-grade lead teacher for a school in the heart of the most extensive public housing developments in the city.

That academic year, I was responsible for teaching English Language Arts and Social Studies to fourth-grade students. Students were 99% African American and predominately males. What was immediately striking was the thought of people living in run down housing developments, deplorable neighborhood community stores, the school's structural condition, and stench of trash on school grounds and streets. Inside the school, students' desks were in poor condition, classroom equipment was tattered and worn, technology equipment was broken, and there was chipped paint along each hallway of the school, covered with obscene graffiti.

At the onset of trying to fit into an environment that I was not familiar with, I was met with immediate resistance. Students did not look like me and I did not look like

them. They were extremely disrespectful and portrayed an attitude to suggest I would not be working there very long. During the first month of school, I felt as if my life had turned upside down. Never before had I overheard fourth-grade students using profanity, having open conversations about sex, who was a victim of being shot, or who was selling drugs, or who had recently joined the Crips or Blood gangs. The girls were more outspoken and felt it necessary to protect their unruly behavior even if it meant cursing at adults. The boys were not much different; however, it was not uncommon for a simple conversation to turn into fierce anger and violence. In conjunction with what was happening in the classroom, the lead principal decided it would be best for teachers to walk students' home after school as a method to begin working on relationships with students and parents. I had never been so afraid in my life as I was walking along a narrow dirt trail riddled with hypodermic needles, used condoms, and gun casings. The neighbors sat on their stoop and glared without saying a word. The stench of waste and trash fumigated the air.

For days on end, my world of teaching had become increasingly difficult. I was unfamiliar with hearing gun shots in broad daylight, the school coding to lock-in, lock-down, and seeing police on foot running with guns in hand while helicopters fly nearby.

It came with little surprise academics were not a major concern for most male or female students. While girls were more vocal and made a concerted effort to engage in academic content, males were disengaged, trying desperately not to be recognized. Nevertheless, all students needed high doses of academic support, but African American males had a chip on their shoulders and my fear was the same chip would afford a one-

way ticket to a dead-end road unless they had a reason to value school life and what it had to offer.

While strategizing a plan to address the students' academic downturns, I would be remiss not to readdress my position being met with rejection and defiance as a new teacher. Building relationships was challenging and long-standing before students would begin to talk about home, feelings, or what they aspired to become in life. There was no easy way to approach building relationships without losing countless instructional hours, but something had to be done. One way in building student relationships was spent embedding real-life stories into instruction and creating questions that applied to what students understood and knew about themselves, their neighborhood, and schooling experiences. What I gleaned from students was a plea to be welcomed and appreciated for being fourth-grade students living a life they did not see as a problem. It became evident the problem was in trying to "fix" students, mostly males, as opposed to accepting students as they were and pouring into their lives in efforts to enrich their educational experiences and cultivate their minds to engage in new learning. I felt this was the only way I could empower students to see something more in themselves regardless of the chaos and negative stereotype beliefs they had grown accustom too.

This personal commitment was met with a few measures, such as arriving early to work to ensure students knew once they finished eating breakfast, they were welcome to come into the classroom for support with homework or instructional content they did not understand. It also meant forming fireside chats (class meetings) when students appeared distracted and needed to unleash issues privately or amongst the group.

Traditional teaching and learning were often negated, and for good reasons if expectations were set for students to strive in closing years of instructional voids. Undoubtedly, it was heartbreaking to hear fourth-grade students reading choppy and barely decoding words to make sense of simple sentences that were on kindergarten level. Therefore, as part of the instructional routine, students were exposed daily to letter-sound correspondence, sight words, sight word phrases, simple sentences, and basic grammar.

Outside of core instruction, students were supported with one-on-one interventions, small group instruction, and bouts of support from special education teachers. Additionally, after-school tutoring programs, and writing labs were formed with the assistance of other fourth-grade teachers. The academic progress students were making was slow going, but I could see a shift in student beliefs. The males in my classroom were more comfortable in sharing their thoughts in classroom discussions and were striving hard to stay focused on learning. Relationships with the girls were also developing and I could tell they no longer saw me as an outsider.

Field trips were planned to engage students in artwork, theatre, musicals, and college campus tours throughout the year. That year, the movie Hidden Figures was released which was an awesome opportunity for students to see the heroic contributions African Americans have made in history. Benefits gained from field trips helped students to understand with hard work and dedication, they could attend any college they desired and live the life they dreamt about.

By the second semester of school, data trajectory revealed students were still below grade level but moving toward the beginning of fourth-grade proficiency. There was not enough time to cover all students beckoned for in ten months; however, more

were reading fluently by the end of the year, posing questions beyond surface-level context, and willing to take books home to read to their siblings and parents.

At the end of the school year, leaving students was a double edge sword. Students were not immediately aware that the neighborhood school, which held so many memories and experiences, would be closing permanently. In walking students' home, I knew that it would be my last time seeing their smiling faces and the last opportunity to encourage them to keep going even when life would become difficult. Gang life, drugs, and criminal acts occurred every day in the neighborhood, and I was immensely concerned the most vulnerable population of students, males, would be tempted to become affiliated. The burning inside of me left a brand to personally carry a mission out to ensure African American students, especially males, know and believe through hard work and dedication, academic achievement and career success is attainable regardless of the neighborhood from where it all starts.

After the closing of school, professional endeavors have led my work as a school-based elementary literacy coach, district coach, and currently serving as Dean of Instruction where I can make greater impact for our most vulnerable and at-risk students. I have also attained an EdS in Administration and Supervision and am currently a doctoral candidate at Middle Tennessee State University, pursuing a degree in Assessment Learning and School Improvement with an anticipated graduation date of May 2022.

CHAPTER FOUR

Findings

This study aimed to focus on how African American adolescent males view classroom learning experiences through their voices and stories of school. This hermeneutic phenomenology study examined the experiences of fourth-grade African American males in an urban school environment.

Chapter 4 introduces the findings from the researcher's interaction with three African American male students in their natural school and classroom setting.

School Demographics

Established over 50 years ago in a southern, mid-sized urban setting located in the Middle Tennessee area, Dowell Elementary School currently enrolls 340 students on record. The school is designated as Title 1, which indicates a poverty level of 40% or higher, entitling the school to receive federal funds to provide instructional materials and resources to students. Dowell Elementary has 21 certified teachers, administrators, and support staff, of which only three are African American. Teacher retainment is well represented as 90% of teachers have 3 to 34 years of teaching experience in the same school.

Based on information obtained through the state's report card website, the school was given a letter grade of H, meaning Held Harmless, as 80% or more students did not participate in state testing. School districts considered Held Harmless are not held accountable or liable for academic state testing data for the year. Furthermore, the academic success rates dropped from 28.6% in 2019 to 15.8% in 2021. When analyzing overall student achievement, only 17.9% of students were identified as having support in

math and 10% in English Language Arts. Ethnicity data reflect African American students having 10.5% in math and 5.3% in English Language Arts proficiency.

The school's overall performance shows that 17.2% of students are chronically absent. Of that 17.2%, 19.5% were identified as African American. Chronic Absenteeism is defined by the state as a student being out of school for ten or more days, excused or unexcused. District discipline referral information was not specific to the school of study; however, according to 2018-19 state data, overall suspension rates for the entire county was 11.2 %. Of the 11.2%, African American students account for 19.1%, more than any subgroup.

Overall, the school's data suggests a trend of potential issues with student attendance, discipline, and academic performance of students attending the school of study. African American student data suggests a downward trend in academic achievement, rates of academic success, and large achievement gaps across content areas. As described below, three African American male fourth-grade students participated in this study to share their schooling experiences. The following summary is a condensed profile of participants derived from interview session data.

Student Participants Profiles

Michael

Michael is a ten-year-old male fourth-grader who has been enrolled in Dowell Elementary for three years. He is a talkative, soft-spoken individual who loves to tell stories about family, school, or special events in his life. He lives with both parents and a four-year-old sister.

The researcher could tell Michael's home life appeared family-oriented from multiple conversations. He described home life as enjoyable and felt a sense of belonging. While spending time with family during Fall Break, Michael expressed, "It felt good because we went to Panchos…." (restaurant) and "my cousins came over, and we played football."

Michael's parents work to support their family and improve living conditions. Michael had a sense of proudness in his voice when explaining, "I moved into my neighborhood last year." "My old neighborhood were apartments!"

When working, Michael's parents have additional family support from his grandparents. Michael says, "When mom and dad have to work, we go over to my Nana's (grandmother) house," which did not appear to be a problem for Michael. During recreational time at home, he also enjoys spending time with cousins' bike riding, and playing outdoors.

Michael stands at the average height of a ten-year-old male but is slightly heavier in weight for adolescents of his age. He wears glasses and presents himself neat and clean with appropriate school clothing (although students are not required to wear standard school attire) and a stylish "bald fade" low haircut. Michael is not a troublemaker and tries his best to separate himself from the negativity that evolves in the classroom. He carries a sense of naiveness and innocence that was exhibited during interview sessions.

He believes in meeting behavioral and academic expectations; however, much of his understanding is to gain merit or rewards from his teacher and parents. When speaking about his grades of As and Bs, he states, "When I come home with my report

card, my mom is happy with me, and when my papa (dad) sees my report card, he buys me stuff."

James

James is a fourth-grade male student who has been enrolled in Dowell Elementary for one academic year. He is ten years old and lives in a single-parent home where his mother is the sole provider. This student has five siblings, ages 18,17,16 7, who reside in the home, and an older brother, age 26, who lives outside the home. James mentioned that four of the five siblings have the same mom, but not fathers. James can be characterized as honest, careful with his words, observant, slightly temperamental, tough, and one who knows right from wrong, even if he decides to engage in wrongful acts.

He appeared sensitive to questions about home life and tended to shy away from providing details of his family structure and environment. He remained silent and completely unphased by not responding to specific questions about home life, siblings, and neighborhood events which could have helped better understand James's overall character and beliefs.

When he did choose to speak about his parents, his comments were focused more on his mom. When he explained what his parents were most proud of regarding his school experience, he related the question to his mom by saying, "because I have a bunch of 100's, one C, and I get money." He also spoke about his mom's desire for him to become a professional basketball player, which was not far off from what James desired for himself. James mentioned his father during one interview session but was careful not to share too much information.

He stands the average height of a typical ten-year-old male and is of average weight. He wore hoodies and gently worn khaki pants or jeans for six weeks. His hair was cut low on the sides and raised at the top, commonly referred to as a high-top fade. During the last interview, the participant's hair was cut evenly across, making his cheeks appear smaller and his face narrower.

James acknowledges he tends to withdraw from classroom academic expectations and quickly becomes off-task primarily because he gets confused or uninspired to keep trying. He does understand the need for education but anchors his reason, as previously mentioned, to gain access to play in a national sports arena, preferably the National Basketball Association.

Concerning James's academic support, he admits most of his academic support comes from school. He realizes his struggles in math and does not mind participating in a daily Response to Intervention as part of his academic regiment. His grades range from As to Cs, depending on the content and level of engagement he decides to provide.

Chris

Chris has four years of enrollment at Dowell Elementary. He lives with his mom, a single parent, and four siblings ranging in ages 7, 5, 4, and 1. His father is remarried and has a one-month old child with his stepmom. Chris is a clever, talkative, realistic, and sensible young man. He tends to explain his thoughts well enough so that he is fully understood by his audience and does not mind debating his opinion.

When Chris speaks about home life, he does not appear bothered by his mom and dad residing in separate households. However, he attributes much of his life to learning from his dad as he acknowledges, "My dad teaches me everything I know even though he

does not live with me." Based on other responses, Chris has opportunities to spend time between both households when school is not in session.

Life for Chris in the neighborhood is not always a pleasant experience. Chris spoke of a fight that had taken place in the park between him and a fifth-grade student, strange knocks at the door during bed time, and constant disruptions from neighborhood peers when he tries to study.

He is smaller in stature and weight in the classroom than any of his peers; however, he does not see his height or weight as a hindrance and presents himself confidently. He wears an even, low haircut that does not draw much attention and wears mostly jeans and a short-sleeved t-shirt regardless of the temperature outdoors.

Amongst the three, Chris provided more in-depth responses that closely answered the questions and provided rational reasons to support his answers. Chris is disciplined in his studies and admits to his successes and challenges in school. He is meeting or exceeding grade-level expectations and is strong in mental math. During observations, Chris appeared to be off task but could respond to math questions with little to no effort. When engaging in soccer, he has a rambunctious spirit, and is highly competitive in making sure his team wins and no one cheats!

Classroom Demographics

The researcher observed students in their math classroom setting. The classroom was in the fourth-grade hallway, first door on the left. Sixteen classroom seats were arranged vertically in four rows; however, in the far-top right corner, two student desks belonging to a white male and one bi-racial male student were set apart from other students and appeared in proximity to the teacher. Initially, there were 17 students

identified in the classroom. One African American male student was added shortly after Fall Break.

Student subgroups consist of four African American males, four African American females, four Caucasian females, five Caucasian males, and one bi-racial male student. In place of name tags, students were represented by a number labeled on the front side of each desk that faced the front of the classroom and the teacher's view. The researcher did not identify a specific seating arrangement to explain the purpose for student placement.

The classroom walls were dressed in posters about general classroom rules, math anchor charts, a numerical seating chart, and behavioral expectations. Inside student desks were textbooks, a practice guide for math, loose notebook paper, and writing utensils. Additionally, each student had their water bottle typically located on the right corner of their desk.

In the far-right corner of the classroom, the teacher had a blue u-shaped table stacked with student work samples and student assessment papers. During classroom observations, the researcher positioned in this location to gain a clear and conscious view of the teacher, students, and interactions taking place in the classroom.

Teacher Profile

To fill the short-term vacancy for the teacher of record, Mr. Henry (pseudonym) became the fourth-grade math and science teacher. The middle-aged white male teacher stood about 6'1" with a slender build, clean shaved face, and thin-framed glasses. Mr. Henry did not appear uncomfortable in teaching fourth math content but appeared to have some difficulties with classroom management. He spent an absorbent amount of time

redirecting student behaviors and engaging students in math lessons. Students were expected to follow along in their textbook while Mr. Henry displayed game-like math problems on the Promethean board for students to discuss and solve. On numerous accounts, students were non-compliant in staying on task by chattering, passing notes, and interrupting by asking to leave the classroom for restroom breaks resulting in Mr. Henry invoking punishment for the entire class.

Self-Efficacy

RQ 1. African American adolescents' perspectives and their experiences in urban schools addressed students' understanding of how self-efficacy is illustrated through their perspectives of school, teacher interaction, classroom learning environment, and peers.

Self-Efficacy and School

James began explaining his overall feelings about school and what he stood to gain from his school environment. He commented that he dislikes school because he wakes up early. However, Chris stated he favors school because he can play Prodigy, an interactive online video game that supports mathematical concepts.

In speaking about their favorite subject, Chris and James expressed being fond of math; however, Chris admitted math was a struggle due to his lack of attention during his third-grade year. He expressed, "I didn't pay attention to multiplication and division that well, but we are learning more about it." As both students began to reflect on how they viewed school and how it impacted their lives, James's perception of school was rather daunting. He described school as a place where there is "too much work." "I don't like doing work!" "I'm lazy, and I like to sit and play the game all day." Chris provided a slight grin, nodding his head in agreement.

James elaborated more by comparing his former school to Dowell Elementary. He stated, "When we went around and did stuff in my old school, we got to play games, go outside, and then there were subjects..." Chris placed emphasis on playing Prodigy and kickball (sports) to support how school impacts his life.

When discussing aspects of their learning experiences, students were most proud of, Michael raised his hand to say, "I think about my work because when the teacher checks my work, he says sometimes I do good and stuff…." "When I grow up and go to high school, I'm going to pass!" Chris understood the connection to his grades and learning experiences quite differently. Chris, being slightly more mature in his thinking, understood grades would lead to college and attaining his desired job. He stated, "When it's time to work, I have to do whatever I have to do because if I don't, my future might be messed up, and I might not be able to do what I want to do." James predicated much of his academic success on his dream of playing professional sports. As Michael and Chris were conversating, something awakened James's thoughts to ask, "Do I have to get an education to play sports?" "I really want to get my education!"

Self-Efficacy and Teacher

Students reflected on a time their teacher may have taught or said something they felt was incorrect and how such actions might affect their beliefs. Michael connected his story to a previous encounter before Mr. Henry became his teacher. Michael began describing an event in science class and felt affirmed in stating his teacher was correct in what she taught. After which, he smiled as if he had complete confidence in his response and finished eating his fruit cup, ignoring the realization of Mr. Henry as his current teacher and possible encounters that could have presently occurred.

Anxiously waiting to speak, Chris began tapping on the desk with the end of his pencil. Once Michael concluded his statement, Chris jumped in to say, Mr. Henry is not always correct! "Whenever we do our multiplication, Rocket Math, when I get my test back, I put 24 for 8x3; it comes back 36!" Michael chuckled, "Yeah, and sometimes he will write the wrong question." When James had an opportunity to share, he shook his head from side to side, replying, "I don't know."

As conversations evolved, a sensitive topic arose about adult figures in their lives and who have helped them become the person they are. Instead of attributing success to family, James focused on Mr. Henry. With few words to express his thoughts, he stated that Mr. Henry tells the class, "To worry about themselves and be yourself." Michael spoke of his niece, with words of thankfulness for her help while he learned virtually due to the pandemic. Chris described his dad and how impactful his dad's presence had been in his life. He states, "My dad because he taught me everything I know even though he doesn't live with me." "We still read books, and he helps me with my homework."

Self-Efficacy and Learning Environment

Students knew this would be their last year in an elementary school; therefore, their individual beliefs about their learning environment created a mirror of academic attainment and personal goals as their middle school years were vastly approaching. When describing their fourth-grade experiences, James made it known that his experience as a fourth-grader was "fun," especially when everyone in the classroom was present and they could "make forts behind the teacher." Chris agreed he too had fun but immediately stopped short in conversating about his encounters.

Students discussed their learning environment and classroom expectations Mr. Henry had set for math class. Chris frowned and dug his head into his chest. His facial expression became serious, and his smile disappeared. He acknowledged respect for Mr. Henry but was uncertain about what lay ahead once his teacher returned. He explained, "Before the teacher left, she said go with the flow and do what they tell you, but I'm scared because we have already done the work and when she comes back, we will have a lot of work..."

James was somewhat confused and asked for the question to be repeated. When he began to speak, he agreed that he does respect Mr. Henry's learning environment and acknowledges he is to do "what the teacher says."

Michael admitted he gets nervous in math class and feels that he will not pass. James concurred with Michael. In a defeated tone, James says, "It's hard sometimes." "I get frustrated!" Chris finishes the conversation by referring to a previous comment explaining his deficits in multiplication. He stated, "I know the answers because I know a little bit of multiplication because I have been practicing through my fourth-grade year, but when we test, it's easy but, I still have more multiplication to learn."

Additionally, students expressed sentiments about classroom learning practices and if learning has value. Leading the charge in conversation, Chris proclaimed, "We learn the same thing every day." "We have learned everything there is to know about that stuff!" James conveyed, "Sometimes we learn about some things, and then we learn about the same thing." "It gets annoying!" Michael, being somewhat hesitant, said, "I agree with Chris just a little because we will learn about solid and gasoline all the time, and we go to the same page over and over."

Self-Efficacy and Peers

How students gauge self-efficacy amongst peers is depicted through stories and events that have taken place in the classroom and living environment. Students spoke of classroom consequences stemming from infractions of peers and how those actions affected their behaviors and responses. Mr. Henry had set a tone in the classroom that made accountability in behavior a one for all. Michael described how consequences impacted him and his emotional state when he has to pay for the misbehavior of peers. He stated, "It makes me feel pretty mad at them because we won't get that much time to eat or play…." James, speaking in an annoyed tone, recalled, "We have to repeat if we line up, so if people are talking, we have to line up again." "It makes me feel mad because I want to go to recess!" Chris was a bit more descriptive from his point of view. He recanted feelings of anger because at "certain times, I feel different stuff because it's just certain people" who keep violating expectations. "I stand at the door because I'm hungry!"

Chris had a keen perception of peers who purposefully initiated arguments, disruptions, and sometimes fights. Unfortunately, school and the learning environment were not the only place he had to deal with such adversities. In the neighborhood park, Chris recalled a fifth-grade male approaching him, and they began to fight. Chris said the fight started because "he said my momma doesn't know how to discipline kids." "The next day and the next day, I was mad."

Research question one responds to the theme of self-efficacy and is characterized through students' understanding and perception of school, teacher, learning environment,

and peers. These accounts relinquish how students relate to their personal beliefs, capabilities, academic goals, and how they perceive themselves.

School Belonging

RQ 2. How and when do students feel connected (valued) and disconnected (marginalized) from classroom learning? This question raises awareness of how students perceive their sense of school belonging at Dowell Elementary: students' shared in-depth experiences aligning to school belonging through the lens of school, teacher, learning environment, and peer encounters.

School Belonging

After two months into the academic year, students had approached Fall Break, granting students one week away from Dowell Elementary. It came as no surprise that Michael and Chris were hyped about their adventures and time spent with family. James attempted to mimic the same energy level as his peers in saying Fall Break was "fine." "We were going to Gatlinburg for my sister's birthday, but she was acting up." He took a moment to sigh, then continued to say, "I barely get to see my dad." "I can see him over my granny's house, but right now, she is in rehab." "She had her hip replaced." The room fell silent.

In effort to change the mood, students were fueled with excitement in sharing reasons why they were excited to return to school. Michael announced he was ready to come back to see friends and have opportunities to play. Chris, who is highly competitive, said he was ready for "gym because we are coming back to play Elimination, and this is one of my favorite games!" This game is commonly observed in elementary school physical education classes. The game allows one challenger to use a

soft basketball to tag their opponent without moving from a designated area. Once the ball contacts their opponent, they have been eliminated!

Aside from being pleased to come back for sports-like games, Chris had a much deeper reason for returning to school. He was vulnerable in sharing incidents that frequently occurred at home when it is time for bed. From Chris's facial expression and body posture, it was evident he was bothered with the story he was about to tell. He expressed, "Whenever I am at home when it's time to rest, I hear noises like somebody knocking on my door, so I can't sleep." "I watch TV, and when I arrive at school, I am perfectly fine!"

James's sentiment revealed a somewhat different view than Michael and Chris's as he expressed a level of readiness for his teacher to return to the classroom. James juxtaposed his excitement in returning to school and his teacher's return in saying, "She said she would be back after Fall Break." "She said she would be back in November."

School belonging and Teacher

When students described their opinion and some of the experiences or encounters with Mr. Henry, James chose to comment about Mr. Henry indirectly. He conversed about an instructional routine, drops in the bucket. James appeared dissatisfied with the way Mr. Henry had chosen to utilize this activity. He explained, "He lets us do drops in the bucket this week, and then we will do the same one next week." "Our 95% folder, our original teacher did three columns and three the next day."

Chris admited his experiences with Mr. Henry have been "pretty good"; however, he concurred with James regarding his dissatisfaction with Mr. Henry's handling of drops in the bucket. He admitted:

It just confuses me sometimes because, with our original teacher, we had more things in one place. We do one row each, and then we do another one. I accidentally finished the entire thing because I forgot he said to do just one row.

As students were observed in their math classroom setting, noticing student engagement and withdrawal was prevalent. Students were asked to discuss their actions and what events occurred in the classroom to create favorable or adverse reactions during the lesson. Chris stated:

What causes me to participate is because I know the answer in my head, but when I raise my hand, somehow I always get stuck having to answer the problem, so I don't get to do what I want to do. I got upset because I didn't get to go first because he calls on another student.

School Belonging and Learning Environment

Students' minority status in their learning environment suggests their presence may have held some bearing on how they perceived belonging in their classroom. As an attempt to understand how well students understood race and gender and if being an African American male had an impact on learning, Chris said he was not "surprised" he was African American and began to describe an encounter when Mr. Henry gave points of merit for everyone sitting in their seats. Chris noticed "everybody who was black" was sitting, but Mr. Henry did not give points immediately to black students for complying. He "then started picking the black people."

Because Chris identified himself as "black," the discussion shifted around the idea of being black in the classroom and if students experienced or witnessed differences from their white male peers. Michael justified his response by saying, "People make sounds like they always do, so we have to restart our quiet time because they make sounds and stuff." James agreed with Michael and began explaining that minutes are taken from

recess or gym when the learning environment is not conducive to Mr. Henry's expectations. He explained, "People are loud, and they keep being loud; he will just put more minutes on the board."

They also spoke of feeling uncomfortable and, in some cases, nervous when being assessed. Michael began explaining when peers collect test papers, they are placed in a test bucket. He said, "I get nervous if they copy off my paper." "They blame it on other people." Leaning his body forward and looking directly across the table, James stated, "He's talking about our test bucket." "What if we're not right, then students tell the teacher I copied off them!" Likewise, Chris agreed with Michael and James, but he also knew trust could not be guaranteed, so he decided to "fold" his paper when peers came to collect.

Chris's battle for a conducive learning environment occurred on school grounds as well as at home. His annoyance also came from neighborhood peers when he is home attempting to study. He stated, "Neighbors knock at my door asking if I can come outside." "Whenever I am trying to do something that is learning, they keep knocking, and then I can't concentrate!"

School Belonging and Peers

Belonging and peer interactions in the learning environment were vividly illustrated as students weighed their opinion on whether they got in more trouble than their peers. James smirked while admitting, "Sometimes, I am talking when I'm not supposed to talk." Michael's opinion led him to say he does not get in more trouble than his peers and supported his point in saying, "I didn't get my name on the board and yelled at yesterday." "I got a piece of candy for being good."

Students also suggested that their primary reason for being in trouble is contributed to the actions of their peers. Chris stated:

> Whenever somebody tries to do something funny, I start laughing. We get in trouble sometimes when we are supposed to be quiet. Then, we are the ones who get in trouble, and it makes me mad and upset so, I don't do my work and sit down and lay down. They have a negative effect on me because they don't get in trouble for what they do.

James responded, "Yes, people like to get people in trouble, so basically, what he said." "They have a negative effect on me." Michael also agreed that peers negatively affect his behavior due to their consistency in breaking classroom rules and blaming others for their actions.

More specifically, students articulated who exactly made them feel this way. Chris pointed to the left side of the classroom and said, "It's more of the people on that side of the room." "One kid keeps telling us to shut up when we try to help him not get into trouble." Michael stated, "It's not the girls." "One boy talks bad about people and stuff and talks about people moms." From James's perspective, he felt white male peers adversely impacted his sense of belonging. He concluded his comment in saying "but the three of us have a positive relationship."

Chapter Summary

This phenomenological qualitative study aimed to hear the voices of African American fourth-grade males' schooling experiences in a school setting. Data analysis indicates and supports themes of poverty, trauma, self-efficacy, and school belonging as shown through student's beliefs and interactions about school, teacher, learning environment, and peers.

RQ.1 addresses participants' perspectives of self-efficacy for academic attainment, goals, and personal beliefs. RQ 2 addresses students' perception of school belonging, how and when they felt connected (valued) or disconnected (marginalized) in their schooling experiences. Poverty and trauma were identified as interwoven themes in Dowell Elementary's School's profile, participant profiles, and participants' experiences.

The next chapter will discuss the study's results based on the interpretive analysis from the researcher using the constant comparative method used to support findings. Furthermore, implications, recommendations, and intent for future research will be explained in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER FIVE

Chapter Summary

Interpretations of data from Chapter 4 using hermeneutic phenomenology analysis compares the researcher's findings in the present study against contemporary literature, identifies studies that possess similar themes, and acknowledges gaps in which literature from the current study aims to impart new knowledge. This chapter will also provide recommendations for future research, implications for African American adolescent males' learning experiences, limitations of the study, and concluding remarks.

Purpose of Study

This hermeneutic phenomenological study aimed to understand the perspectives of African American adolescent males and their schooling experiences. Therefore, this study aimed to hear African American males' voices and stories on how they felt about school, teacher, learning environment, and peers. The two research questions were initially raised to guide this study: 1) What are the perspectives of African American Adolescents and their experiences in urban schools? and 2) How and when do they feel connected (valued) and disconnected (marginalized) from classroom learning?

RQ.1 addressed self-efficacy of participants' perception of how school, teacher, learning environment, and peers affect how they approach personal beliefs, academic achievement, and goals. Examples from data support the researcher's notion that Michael, James, and Chris have low self-efficacy that can adversely affect their learning experiences. From responses, students appeared to have a minimal understanding of why self-efficacy (see page 30 for definition of terms) is vital to their academic success. For example, James had an adverse perception of school in stating, "Too much work." "I

don't like doing work." "I'm lazy." There was also frustration when students faced behavioral consequences because of their peers' misbehaviors. Students spoke of being hungry, ready for lunch, and ready for recess but were delayed due to lining up multiple times because of behaviors they were not responsible for. Accounts are supported by students saying, "It makes me feel pretty mad at them because we won't get that much time to eat or play" and "I get mad at them because it's just certain people who keep doing it" "I stand at the door because I'm hungry!"

Data does not support or imply that students' lack of self-efficacy could be attributed to the previous schooling; however, it could be fairly considered that students were labeled as high-risk academically and poor learners, which may have a bearing on how they see themselves as achievers.

RQ.2. participants related their encounters of school belonging to the experiences much like self-efficacy when speaking about school, teacher, learning, and peers. Students expressed multiple accounts of school belonging which adversely impacted their sense of school belonging. For example, when assessed, students revisited when they felt uncomfortable due to flagrant acts of cheating by peers. James stated, "What if we're not right, then the student tells the teacher I copied off them." To further support views of school belonging, they spoke of missed opportunities in their learning environment. Chris stated, "I got upset because I didn't go first because he calls on another student." White male peers were also shown to have a negative impact on how students perceive a sense of belonging. Michael stated "It's like some of the boys." "It is really not the girls." "One boy talks bad about people and talks about people moms."

It can be speculated that students' experiences of school, teacher, learning environment, and peers have added to their dissatisfaction and aggression, potentially causing a separation between them as students and belonging at Dowell Elementary.

Overview of Study

In the literature review, four variables were suggested to profoundly affect African American males' academic plight. Findings from this study support research results on why poverty, trauma, self-efficacy, and school belonging are leading factors that contribute to academic disparities.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) scholars believe voice is a powerful mechanism when utilized through personal narratives and stories to counteract stories and practices of the dominant group (Delgado, 1989). In education, literature on CRT focuses on voice as students present their counter-story of schooling experiences bringing "voice" to the present phenomenon.

Outside the two research questions, additional interview questions were raised to support themes of poverty and trauma. Critical race theorists highlight the importance of understanding poverty and trauma, particularly for students who attend schools in underserved communities. Aside from African American males' physical and emotional issues, students may face family and environmental situations that suggest African American males are aggressive, defiant, and unmotivated to learn (Grace & Nelson, 2019).

Discussion

Self-Efficacy and School

Michael, James, and Chris were asked to share their feelings about school. Chris liked school because he could play an online math game, while James expressed his dislike for school because he must wake up early and has little time to play during school hours. James expressed that he does not like school due to waking up early and requiring "too much work." He described himself as lazy, as if suggesting what is asked of him as a student requires effort he is unwilling to put forth. Chris agreed that school does mean "work," but he appeared to have be intrinsically motivated to become receptive to the learning and workload he must carry as a fourth-grade student. Michael did not have an opportunity to share his school views due to his absence when the question was presented. From Michael's personality and subsequent interview responses, it was evident he favors school and worries greatly about making sure his teacher and parents are pleased with his academic performance.

Self-Efficacy and Teacher

Findings also suggest students' relationship with their teacher appeared to be premature and slightly unstable. This could be with good reason, as students were unfamiliar with Mr. Henry as their classroom teacher had arrived only days before the study began. Students were compliant with what was asked of them; however, evidence from responses does not support students relying on Mr. Henry for support or guidance. For example, Chris stated, "Whenever we do our multiplication, Rocket Math, when I get my test back, I put 24 for 8x3; it came back 36!" Based on Chris's account, he did not trust Mr. Henry's judgement as an educational leader. This could be attributed to

feedback from a math assessment which indicated Mr. Henry may not be as knowledgeable in math. It was almost as if Chris felt more confidence in himself and his capabilities and whenever Chris became challenged, he knew he could find support from his parents, particularly his dad. James did not express negative feelings about Mr. Henry or his teacher competencies. James focused on Mr. Henry's positive affirmation, which appeared to resonate deeply. James appeared to take heart in trying to be himself and worrying less about people. It was in question if James latched on to Mr. Henry's words because he viewed Mr. Henry as a male role model who appeared to care. Unfortunately, Michael did not have an opportunity to express his relationship with Mr. Henry due to his absence from school.

Self-Efficacy and Learning Environment

Students spoke of their dissatisfaction with learning and their learning environment. They described feelings in math class and their dissatisfaction with learning repetitive content. James admitted math is "hard sometimes." "I get frustrated." James's comment and tone suggested he was fully aware of his math struggles and not confident he would get past this academic hurdle. Chris also knew of his math deficits but portrayed a more persistent attitude to overcome gaps in learning to maintain his academic attainment. Based on his relationship with Mr. Henry, Chris appeared uncertain he was getting the academic support needed.

Sentiments of learning and how students perceived the value of learning were revealed when students expressed emotions of annoyance when learning content. Chris expressed, "We learn about the same thing every day." "We have learned everything there is to know about that stuff." Michael also agreed. "We go over the same page over

and over." Student responses did not warrant justification of what they had learned not being important, but more so, a lack of exposure to interesting content, providing opportunities for students to challenge their academic stamina. It could also be inferred that student accounts may be solely contributed to experiences with Mr. Henry serving in the role of their fourth-grade teacher. From my perspective, Chris appeared nervous in knowing that playing and fun would dissipate upon his teacher's return and learning expectations would shift into a more serious, structured classroom environment.

Self-Efficacy and Peers

Michael, James, and Chris described multiple reasons why classroom behaviors of peers and consequences impact their feelings. Students presented anger when having to repeat classroom routines such as lining up when leaving the classroom for lunch, gym, or recess. They expressed concerns around why the peers talking or misbehaving were not held accountable for their infractions. James expressed that he feels anger when it is time for the class to line up: "People are talking, we have to line up again." "It makes me mad because I want to go to recess." Chris and Michael displayed emotions of anger when it is time for lunch. Chris stated, "I stand at the door because I'm hungry…." Chris's comment caused me to wonder if school meals could be the only time students received a well-balanced meal. I witnessed first-hand accounts of students when allowed to eat in the classroom; they ate everything on their lunch trays and made sure to drink their milk and juice.

Despite Chris's bouts with peers in the classroom, he also faced adversity with peers in his neighborhood. He spoke of being enticed by an older peer, which led to a physical encounter. Chris proclaimed the fight started when "he said my momma doesn't

know how to discipline kids." "The next day… I was mad!" Although Chris did not

provide specific days this incidence occurred, it affected his temperament, potentially

presenting academic barriers and preventing him from making rational decisions.

The present study aligns with Bandura et al.'s (1992) understanding of self-

efficacy being an integral part of how students decide to take responsibility for their

personal beliefs, choices, and academic goals. It has been revealed that Michael, James,

and Chris, may have lacked self-efficacy, which incapacitated their understanding of

school and its importance. Moreover, students appeared to have a shallow understanding

of why grades, academic goals, and personal beliefs could be the most important aspect

in determining their success throughout middle and high school years.

In a more recent study, Broom (2019) reasoned similarly in asserting that if

African American male students are immersed in a welcoming and supportive

school/classroom environment, self-efficacy may increase and create more positive

teacher relationships.

In the present study's findings, data does not support students having a strong

alliance with self-efficacy to build a strong teacher relationship and independently set

academic goals to ensure their academic success. Much of James and Chris's

understanding of schooling was understood to include an absorbent level of play, online

video games, and compliance in respecting Mr. Henry as their teacher.

Therefore, the researcher has found preceding studies to support why self-efficacy

is important; however, self-efficacy may need to be established during elementary school

years. Kunjufu (2010) reminds us that African American males may stop caring about

school and their academics if school is judged as un-nurturing and not supportive in

helping students identify academic goals and establish positive beliefs to shape their academic pathways for life outcomes.

Terrell & Terrell (1981) & Ogbu (1991) suggest cultural mistrust amongst ethnic groups can also affect self-efficacy and diminish achievement values. Obgu (1991) connotes that African American students and families may exhibit a level of cultural mistrust with dominant cultures or institutions. In some instances, communities of African American families may believe schools inadequately prepare students socially, academically, and provide minimal opportunities for students to succeed academically (Howard, 2013; Irving & Hudley, 2005).

Perhaps there may have been some evidence of cultural mistrust based on James's comment, "The three of us have a positive relationship." Based on classroom demographics of having only four African American male students, three of which are identified in the present study, and a white male teacher may have supported students' understanding there was something unique about their schooling experiences, therefore feeling a need to develop a bond amongst each other.

School Belonging

After Fall Break, students were asked to tell what it felt like to be home with family. Chris and Michael had positive stories regarding time spent with parent(s) and family. James did not express the same positive experiences as his peers.
He stated:

> We were going to Gatlinburg for my sister's birthday, but she was acting up….
> I barely get to see my dad. I can see him over my granny's house. My granny
> is in a nursing home right now because she had surgery on her hip.

From the researcher's point of view, this was the first time James felt vulnerable in sharing a glimpse of emotions underneath his rugged, stoic personality. It appeared that James might have been hurt by the inconsistencies of his father's actions to establish a healthier relationship in his life. It was reasonable to assume James loved his dad and struggled to understand why he did not have a father-son relationship much like Michael and Chris.

After Fall Break, students appeared ready to share what excited them about returning to school. Michael and Chris related their excitement to seeing friends and playing sports-like activities in the gym. Dialogue with James revealed he was excited about his teacher's return to school. He stated, "She said she would be back after Fall Break." "She said she would be back in November." The comment from James led me to believe James desired a sense of belonging in school from an adult who appeared to care about his well-being. James's comment could be attributed to home life with multiple siblings having different fathers and the inconsistent relationship with his dad.

In a story shared by Chris, he may have viewed it as more than a place to learn. He described, "Whenever I am at home when it's time to rest, I hear noises like somebody knocking on my door, so I can't sleep." "I watch TV, and when I arrive at school, I am perfectly fine!" I infer from this account that school hours may have been the time of day Chris felt a strong sense of being safe and secure, potentially lessening his level of anxiety and tension from home life.

School Belonging and Teacher

Relationships between students and Mr. Henry appear to have been inconclusive according to events that had taken place in the classroom. When instruction was

mentioned, students elicited concerns with Mr. Henry's handling of an instructional routine, drops in the bucket. James explained his frustration in Mr. Henry's expectations of completing the task, while Chris admitted he gets "confused" because instructional routines were more organized and "in place with our original teacher." "I accidentally finished because I forgot he said to do just one row." Their primary concern stemmed from Mr. Henry's instructional routines and expectations being different from their original teacher, which left the impression that students were still getting to know Mr. Henry, and the "newness" of his presence had not quite worn off.

While observing students in their math lesson, it was noticeable when students decided to engage or withdraw from engaging in their lesson. Chris stated:

> What causes me to participate, I know the answer in my head, but when I raise my hand, somehow I always get stuck having to answer the problem, so I don't get to do what I want to do. I get upset because he calls on another student.

Chris knew mental math very well; however, Chris was clearly challenged when reading and talking through his understanding of mathematical concepts. He did not openly admit this was an issue for him, but it was revealing that problem-solving might be one of his weakest areas.

School Belonging and Learning Environment

Afforded by bodies of literature, it can be suggested that being African American, black can have an adverse impact for students in their learning environment. Chris acknowledged his identity as an African American, black student and explained an encounter involving the teacher's method to initially incentivize other students before extending those same incentives to African American students in the same classroom.

Chris's comment was not taken as racial. Instead, it raised a question if this was his way of explaining differences in students' treatment.

Mistrusting of peers in their learning environment was also discussed with students. They discussed feelings of mistrust when peers were allowed to collect assessment papers. Chris stated, "They cheat because people pick the paper up sometimes, and they cheat." "I don't turn my paper in wide-open; I fold it." James's feelings were much like Chris's. It appeared James might have felt worried when he questioned, "What if we're not right? Then the student tells the teacher I copied off them." It appeared that building a positive, trusting culture for the learning environment conducive for all students lacked a stable foundation. This problematic issue could be attributed to their teacher leaving the classroom at the beginning of the year, preventing little time for positive culture and climate to be set in motion and stabilized.

In some ways, Chris had to figure out how to protect his learning environment at school and home. He explained that peers knock on his door when home asking if he can come outside to play. Chris stated, "Whenever I am trying to do something that is learning, they keep knocking, and then I can't concentrate!" Chris's home and neighborhood appeared to fit the description of an impoverished area which could lead to infused traumatic events based on demographics alone.

School Belonging and Peers

Interactions amongst peers revealed adverse effects on Michael, James, and Chris's behavior. Chris provided a descriptive account when he enacted similar behavior much like his counter peers but was punished. He explained:

Whenever somebody tries to do something funny, I start laughing, we get in trouble sometimes, and we're supposed to be quiet then we're the ones who get in trouble, and it makes me mad and upset, so I don't do my work and sit down and lay down. They have a negative effect on me because some students don't get in trouble for what they do.

James supported Chris by agreeing, "people like to get people in trouble." Their stories helped to understand why student's felt a disconnection (marginalization) between their peers. Michael specifically stated, "It's not the girls." Chris said, "It's more of the people on that side of the room…" implying a heavy emphasis on white male peers. Towards the end of the conversation, James made a profound statement in saying, "the three of us have a positive relationship." That enlightened me to understand Michael, James, and Chris could be aware of their positionality in the classroom and reliance on one another could be a factor in helping them endure adversities

Duncan's (2010) ethnographic study asserts that school belonging is an essential factor to consider for African American males' academic attainment. His study depicts student encounters of African American males' perceptions behind school walls. During his two-year ethnographic study, Duncan served as a high school teacher and, in doing so, had the opportunity to hear African American students' voices in expressing their perception of their schooling experiences through focus group sessions. Students described adverse accounts when dealing with teachers, peers, administrators, and academic opportunities. Findings from Duncan's study revealed that although the school carried a reputable reputation of caring and supporting all students, African American males in the study accounted for a much different reality. Students experienced marginalization and exclusionary practices that potentially led to unfair disciplinary actions and fewer opportunities to thrive in class academically. Students also recanted

experiencing adversity from peers and faculty who did not understand how African American males think, speak, or behave.

Additionally, white peers spoke in a derogatory manner to African American males, suggesting students did not have a father figure in the home and relied on school mentoring programs to support parental deficits. Students illustrated unfair scoring practices in the classroom with certain faculty members, while Duncan witnessed faculty and administrator's demeaning comments when analyzing African American achievement measures. Duncan concluded his study by understanding that African American males' attitudes and values were set apart from teachers and other students, which led to African American males' adverse feelings of school belonging.

The present study agrees with Duncan's (2010) study that African American males' sense of belonging can be obscured from the school's perception of care and value for all students. During focus group discussions, Michael, James, and Chris expressed adverse accounts of school belonging pertaining to school, teachers, and peers. While most accounts were driven from school-based experiences, not all were attributed to school life. Unlike Duncan's (2010) study, which focused on students behind the school's walls and those experiences, the present study explored home life and environmental factors that could have played a role in how students perceived marginalization or connectedness of school belonging. Chris and James spoke of events in their home life and environment that could have negatively impacted school belonging, making relationships with their teacher, peers, and learning more difficult.

Impressions from student accounts of their schooling experiences and home-life imply trauma had played a part in both entities. Data obtained does not suggest extreme

trauma; however, research does support when students are exposed to repeated traumatic stressors, those transmissions of stress can impact their biological and neurological system, in most cases causing emotional vulnerability as feelings of violation and betrayal may reside within (Downey & Crummy, 2021). Responses from students suggest they have been exposed to traumatic stressors stemming from non-trusting relationships with peers, unstable father and son relationship, and adverse neighborhood events.

These findings support Goodman's (2012) longitudinal study suggesting traumatic stress can play a role in reading, math, and science and adversely affect academic achievement. From a collection of student assessments, parental interviews, teacher assessments, and observed student reading, math, and science, Goodman's research team determined that students with traumatic stress had adverse effects on academic achievement.

The present study supports Goodman et al.'s (2012) understanding that traumatic stress can adversely affect student academics, however, this depends on the extent and negative factors within students' environment. Michael, James, and Chris expressed negative encounters with white male peers' demeaning comments, acts of cheating and inappropriate behaviors, and classroom consequences, which supported students' adverse feelings in the classroom and could potentially induce some form of trauma.

Outside the classroom, James and Chris expressed interactions in the home and environment that could have led to a level of traumatic stress. Chris spoke of an altercation resulting in violence with a peer that left him angry for days. It was not clear if Chris felt these emotions in the classroom, but the situation could have affected his willingness to focus academically. He also spoke of home interactions that prevented

proper sleep and disturbances by neighboring peers that impacted his concentration to study. James spoke of his relationship with his father and visits to his grandmother's home when the opportunity arose for him to see his father. Although James did not speak much on the subject, the instability his relationship with his father could have caused emotional trauma.

Themes of self-efficacy, school belonging, and trauma have been identified through students' stories and perspectives of school, teacher, learning environment, and peers that serve as viable reasons why African American males are not meeting required levels of achievement in schools and persistently demonstrate academic deficits. However, the researcher also acknowledges that poverty can also be why students experience inadvertent schooling results. Questions were not specifically raised about poverty, but were evidenced in school demographic data and students' home-life circumstances.

Ladson-Billings (2017) explains that African American students residing in impoverished conditions have adverse school attendance rates, test scores, and graduation rates. She further explains that African American children who come from a "culture of poverty" (see page 41) tend to find difficulty in social and institutional obligations and are known to have an increased risk of adverse social-emotional and behavioral outcomes.

Unlike Ladson-Billings, who suggest the culture of poverty does affect students' academic achievement, Payne (2005) disagreed in suggesting poverty was not a factor in learning and children who come from poverty need to be taught in the mainstream of society under middle-class values to overcome their deficits. Angela Duckworth (2016)

agreed with Payne (2005) in suggesting that students can rise above their impoverished circumstances by developing grit.

Under the present study, data supports Ladson-Billings (2017) and Gaddis & Lauen's study (2014), suggesting poverty bears institutional inadequacies in academic achievement school funding and is likely to oppress African American students' academic success' much like Michael, James, and Chris.

Dowell Elementary is predominately funded under Title 1, indicating a high level of poverty in the community. Means to federal funds support and assist schools like Dowell who need financial support in purchasing instructional materials and resources necessary for student learning and growth potential.

Poverty was also identified as students informally explained their home-life environments. James and Chris reside in a single-family home with their mother and three or more siblings residing the same home, which could ensue students' home life may be financially strained, and families in the community might rely on school and state resources.

Implications and CRT

The present study is built on the theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory, which focuses on the role of "voice" stemming from minority cultural viewpoints of African American adolescent males. Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995) suggest that educational policies and practices in the United States are part of a more sophisticated and extensive political system that is predicated on the subordination of people of color who live in poverty. CRT insists that structural inequities, not a culture of poverty nor individual character traits, dictate life chances, especially urban African American

children. In some cases, structural barriers both lead to and support the persistence of educational disadvantage (Ladson-Billings, 2017).

As noted in Chapter 3 (p.61), the establishment of the present study appealed to six school districts who declined access to African American fourth-grade males in an urban school setting to gain perception and understanding of their learning experiences. Declinations from various districts ranged from lack of interest due to the nature of the study and principals lack of cooperation, presumably due to fear of exposure as a result of data findings. Of the seven school districts, one principal granted permission for the conduction of the study to potentially understand reasons why African American males are low performing and how such findings may strengthen educational practices. In addition to the hurdles for acceptance of the study, gaining parental consent became difficult as parents found concerns with their child taking part in a study that focused solely on African American students. Hence, the inequities that characterize school experiences for African American urban students explain how structural realities today, and possibly for the future, form the foundation of lack of achievement and poor school performance and why scholars in education describe schools as the site of students' problems, not the solution (Carter et al., 2014; Losen, 2014).

Implications and Cultural Identity

The power of voice is known as one of the core tenets that "recognize the experiential knowledge of "people of color" (Matsuda et al., 1993). Delgado (1990) suggests that although there is not one common voice, there is common experience that structure stories of African Americans that allow for the use of the term voice. Michael, James, and Chris were selected using a purposeful sample technique and for the present

study this indicated they shared similarities of being in public schooling since kindergarten. Although Michael, James, and Chris attended the same school and experienced similar encounters in the classroom, their individual personalities and perspectives were found to have stark contrasts.

Michael was not characterized as a behavioral student and demonstrated a desire to please his teacher and parents academically. Michael lived with both parents and did not acknowledge home or neighborhood difficulties. He appeared to have good intentions in making sure he followed rules and tried his best to shy away from adverse classroom interferences.

James was non-emotional and careful in choosing what he decided to discuss. He lived with his mom and five additional siblings and admitted visits with his father are infrequent. James's perception of learning and academics is built on his dream of becoming a professional in the national sports arena. He accepted his academic struggles and decided when he chose to strive harder or withdraw from instruction. James was conscientious about indulging in adverse classroom events such as conversating with peers during inappropriate times, but complained of consequences stemming from similar infractions.

Chris was more practical and sensible in his thinking about academics and learning. Chris lived with his mom and has five additional siblings; however, Chris appeared to have a strong relationship with his father and attributed much of his academic success to his father's teachings. He was open about academic successes and deficits and acknowledged he must work harder if he wants to succeed in life. Chris could also be depicted as the student who has a conscious of right and wrong and when struggles came

upon him in school or home, he exhibited emotions of anger and frustration which may prevent him from his full academic potential.

From an initial glance of participants, it would be reasonable to assume Michael, James, and Chris were more alike than different. This same assumption can hold true for educators who do not acknowledge different children have different needs. Therefore, educators may consider avoiding stereotypes based on race, gender, and background. Building individual relationships and cultivating an environment where students feel a sense of belonging is essential.

In an article, Strayhorn (2020) provides five steps that educators may consider when establishing a sense of belonging with students. He grounds his understanding of belonging based on college experiences of incoming freshman students; however, these five steps may be used to support K-12 educators, especially when considering minority students.

Table 4

Sense of Belonging for Students

Belonging matters and it is sufficient to drive human behavior.	Belonging is a basic human need and is just as important as air, water, food, etc.
Belonging is vital to our existence and optimal human functioning.	As individuals, we question our belonging. Will I make friends? Will people like me?
Social support is a necessary, but insufficient, condition for students' belonging.	As educators, students want us to get to know them by establishing and building relationships.
Experiences of alienation or social isolation can cause cognitive dissonance.	When students feel they do not belong, this can cause their academic capabilities to suffer, and students may lose confidence in themselves.
Belonging leads to positive outcomes and success. It's about finding belonging, not fitting in.	Belonging should not dictate students to make choices that are against who they are nor what they believe.

While we cannot control perimeters outside of school, it is worth considering for educators to acknowledge why belonging in the learning environment may contribute to a positive learning progression for students much like Michael, James, and Chris. As evidenced through their voices, it was difficult for Michael, James, and Chris to establish grounds of belonging as it pertained to the school, teacher, learning environment, and especially peers. Undoubtedly, these students did not fully understand their identity and why belonging in the learning environment was an important aspect of being African American male students. Therefore, it is necessary for educators to acknowledge and accept individual identity of students and create an environment of belonging, so that students can see how dynamic they are with compromising their cultural beliefs.

Implications for Cultural and Linguistic Teaching

In efforts to enhance engagement for African American students into the learning environment, it is equally important for educators to expose students to cultural referents to help students understand that there can be and should be a connection to everyday problems of living in a society that is divided by racial, linguistic, economic, social/cultural, and political lines (Ladson-Billings, 2018). Hollie (2000) refers to this notion as Global Dexterity in addressing situational appropriateness for students to learn how to fit into their school culture with giving in to their cultural identity. He further contends this can be attained by educators countering the narrative of students who are culturally and linguistically misunderstood in using Validation, Affirmation, Building, and Bridging (VABB). This approach allows educators to redirect how we talk to students, relate to students, and most importantly, how we teach students.

Hollie (2000) suggests Validation should demonstrate respect for home culture and language of students. Affirmation is reversing the negative stereotypes of dominant cultures and how language should be portrayed based on history and dominant cultural expectations. Building should help educators recognize cultural and linguistic behaviors of students, using those behaviors to build a healthy relationship with students. Lastly, Bridging is the teacher building and connecting academic and social skills students will need to have future success beyond the classroom.

In the present study's findings, Chris demonstrated why validation is important for African American students. He stated:

> What causes me to participate, I know the answer in my head, but when I raise my hand, somehow, I get stuck having to answer the problem so I don't get to do what I want to do. I got upset because I didn't get to go first because he calls on another student.

Because Chris did not feel validated in sharing his understanding of the instructional content, this experience may have devalued his belonging in the classroom. Duncan's (2010) study recants how exclusionary practices and marginalization can affect academic achievement and efforts for African American students in schools where educators do not understand how African American males think, speak, or behave.

Affirmation in reversing negative stereotypes and non-mainstream dominant cultures based on historical views were found lacking as Chris explained, "The teacher was giving points for sitting down like he said." "Everybody who was black were sitting down but they didn't get points." "Then he started picking the black people." Broom's (2019) study reminds us that affirmation is vital when establishing and maintaining strong, effective student-teacher relationships that support and enhance student's self-

efficacy. In doing so, this may remove barriers such as cultural mistrust that African American students exhibit when academically and socially engaging in school and classroom environments.

The importance of Building and Bridging behaviors of African American males in the classroom are highlighted in the present study as James explained he was most excited to come back to school, "To see my teacher because she said she would be back after Fall Break." "She said she would be back in November." Although James had a limited amount of time before his teacher took leave, he left an impression that their relationship was emerging; it appeared she was willing to build a positive rapport with James to support his academic struggles and social skills. Building and Bridging relationships are key for educators to employ African American students to thrive academically and socially. Students have different needs, and the best way educators can meet their needs is not to overlook their differences. Ladson-Billings (2009) posits, "If teachers pretend not to see students cultural and ethnic differences, they really do not see the students at all and are limited in their ability to meet their educational needs."

It can be argued that school systems across the nation are at high risk based on their academic data, but research has shown that African American males carry the highest dropout rate of any subgroup, inevitably leading to the school-to-prison pipeline process, which often begins in elementary school (Craven et al., 2020). Therefore, it is imperative to instill self-efficacy and belonging in African American male students to support academic beliefs to feel more accepted, respected, and welcomed in the learning environment. Academic acceleration tomorrow cannot be gained if we are not realistic about what we see today.

The findings of this study contribute to the gap in the literature regarding African American males' academic disparities and achievement gaps. The study reinforces findings from the literature and offers the unique voices of Michael, James, and Chris as African American fourth-grade males to further equip educators to examine this context and seek to close existing academic gaps.

Recommendations

This study identified findings that support previous studies in the literature. This study may motivate additional studies and add new knowledge to what is already known in the literature about African American males' students learning experiences. Findings from this study support themes of poverty, trauma, self-efficacy, and school belonging which impact the learning and social experiences in the classroom.

In moving forward, the researcher would like to:

a. Replicate the study with at least eight students in two separate focus groups.

b. Replicate the study in a larger context of inner-city African American male students who are enrolled as fifth or sixth-grade students. Fourth-grade was chosen because the literature suggests that students' educational outcomes can be predicted at this grade level, and such data is used to fuel the school-to-prison pipeline. Based on data results from fourth-grade participants in the present study, fifth-grade or sixth-grade students may provide more clarity and more profound expressions of their school experiences.

c. The expansion of the study to be a longitudinal study of one full academic year. This would allow the researcher to see students' daily interactions amongst teachers, staff, and peers in the nature and schooling environment. Data collected

and analyzed could inform professional development for school districts to infuse Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and minority awareness (VABB) training to help educators better understand how African American students view school in communities where there is a heavy representation of African American students.

Conclusion

As demonstrated through school, teacher, learning environment, and peers, internal and external factors associated with poverty, trauma, self-efficacy, and school belonging adversely impacted Michael, James, and Chris. While students believed that education is necessary and expressed intentions of graduating high school and beyond, long-term outcomes will likely be an uphill battle. Barriers to prevent poverty and community influencers can also dictate their overall success, making it challenging to succeed during middle and high school years academically.

Another jeopardy will be students' ability to build trusting relationships with teachers. This relationship will rely heavily upon the teacher's willingness to understand African American students' environmental background, help create and shape academic goals for students, and foster a community within the school where students feel a sense of belonging. Students in the study provided a vivid account of the differences in peer interaction in the classroom and the consequences associated with those interactions. While race and discrimination did not come forth, students knew behavioral expectations and consequences were not addressed adequately.

As educators and stakeholders of our communities, we have a lofty responsibility to ensure students are immersed in rigorous curriculum and motivated to take responsibility for their learning; however, students' educational and emotional needs are

just as important. As a public-school educator, I have noticed that young students need emotional support from school counselors and psychologists, and many are African American male students. Therefore, it is vital not to overlook the implications surrounding schools that heavily enroll African American students. It is our due diligence to help all students overcome barriers much like self-efficacy and school belonging that can subvert academic success.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Interview Questions and Responses

Question 1: What are your feelings about school?	**James:** "I don't like schools because you have to get up 7 or 6 and you only got a few hours to play." **Chris:** "I like school because we get to play prodigy all day."
Question 2: What would you say is your favorite subject between math or English?	**Chris:** "Math, didn't pay attention to multiplication and more division that well (referenced 3rd grade experience). But we are learning more about it." **James:** "Math because you get to add stuff together. It's like Prodigy, game."
Question 3: What experiences have made you feel this way?	**Chris:** "Work" **James:** "Too much work, I don't like doing work?" "I'm lazy. I like to sit and play the game all day. Sometimes school is fun, like crazy sock day."
Question 4: Have you always felt that way?	**James:** "Like when we go around and do stuff like in my old school, we got to play games, we go outside and then there are subjects you can do. So, after we deal with that subject, we all rotate." **Chris:** "Sometimes we get to play kickball and playing prodigy."

Question 5: Being in fourth-grade places you at the top of elementary school. Next year, you will be in fifth grade. How will you describe your fourth-grade experiences?	**Chris:** "I have fun but one student does too much. He talks about people's mom and tells people they are a snitching and he never stops when we tell on him. He's a snitch" **James**: "Fun, sometimes when everybody is in here, we go around making forts when the teacher is behind you."
Question 6: How would you describe your experience with your teachers?	**Chris:** "They are pretty good. It just confuses me sometimes because our original teacher we had more things in one place." "Now, we do one thing each week but we do social studies and spelling everyday but drops in the bucket he skips it." **James:** "He let us do drops in the bucket this week and then we will do the same one next week." "Our 95% folder is red, our original teacher did 3 column and 3 the next day. The 95% folder is like a vowel and box it in and put a word between each word." **Chris:** "We do one row each and then next one we do another one. I accidentally finished the entire thing because I forgot he said to do just one row."

Question 7: Do you respect learning expectations in your classroom?	Chris: "Yes, because we still learn. Before the teacher left she said go with the flow and do what they tell you to do but I'm scared, because we have already done the work and when she comes back we will have a lot of work and barely time to do prodigy." James: "Uhh huh.. sometimes, yeah, but I respect it. Suppose to do what the teacher said. Sometimes we have snack at 10 oclock, sometimes we do snack a little late because we get done with our work first. After the snack we do prodigy then reading and reading plus, so we are supposed to do what the teacher says."
Question 8: While observing you in math class, what led you to either participate or withdraw from your math lesson?	Chris: "What causes me to participate, I know the answer in my head but when I raise my hand, somehow I always get stuck having to answer the problem so I don't get to do what I want to do. "I got upset because I didn't get to go first, because he calls on another student." James: "I-Ready is when we do math stuff when we have to add stuff…"
Question 9: What are your feelings when you are in math class?	Michael: "Nervous it it's a test. I feel nervous that I'm not going to pass. James: "It's hard sometimes. I get frustrated"

	Chris: "I know the answers because I know a little bit of multiplication because I have been practicing through my fourth-grade year but when we do tests, it's easy but I still go some more multiplication to learn.
Question 10: Can you tell me a time when you felt uncomfortable or embarrassed in class and how might have affected your learning for that day?	**Michael:** "Some people will try to walk up to the bucket and copy off your paper." **James:** "He's talking about our test bucket." What if we're not right, then the student tells the teacher I copied off of them?" **Chris**: "People be trying to cheat, they cheat because people pick the paper sometimes and they can cheat. I don't turn my paper in wide open, I fold it." **Michael:** "I get nervous if they copy off my paper. They blame it on other people." **Chris**: Sometimes, it makes me mad and I can't think straight because some students make noises but one student does it all the time.
Question 11: Do you feel you get in trouble more or less than your peers?	**Chris**: "Less because there's not that much people. Most time I never get my name on the board and if I do, it's because I am telling someone to stop doing something

	they shouldn't do but I get in trouble for telling them not to do.
	James: "Sometimes, I get in trouble because people like to blame stuff on other people or I am talking when I'm not supposed to talk."
	Michael: "Less, because when the teacher came, I didn't get my name on the board and yelled at. Yesterday I got a piece of candy for being good."
Question 12: Do you think that your classmates have an effect on your behavior? **Would you say positive or negative?**	**Chris:** "Yes because whenever somebody tries to do something funny, I start laughing, we get in trouble sometimes and we're suppose to be quiet then were' the one who gets in trouble and it makes me mad and upset so I don't do my work and sit down and lay down. They have negative effect on me because some students don't get in trouble for what they do. When we do quiet time, we be quiet for a little and then we go to recess or lunch, some people just keep on making noises and people laugh and we have to restart." **James:** "Yes, people just like to get people in trouble, so basically what he said." "My classmates have a negative effect because we take 2 minutes before we go to recess because people like to make noise out of nowhere."

	Michael: "Yes, when I'm laying down, a student will start talking to me and saying my name but I ignore him when we have moments of silence." "Negative, people start moaning during quiet time out of nowhere."
Question 13: When you think about life with your families, do you think some things can impact your day of learning that happened before you come to school?	Chris: "Whenever I'm at home, when it's time to go rest, I hear noises like somebody knocked on my door and so then I couldn't sleep." "So then when I went to sleep, I work up and I watched TV until like seven." "When I got to school, I was perfectly fine." Michael: "The other night, my dad was in my room and he was watching something and I woke up. I had a headache, but I took some medicine and then I had a little headache when I was at school and then it ended and then started again."
Question 14: What are some things in your neighborhood or around you outside of school that could possibly affect your learning?	Chris: "I was at the park and some kid in the fifth grade came up to me and we started fighting." "So then, he said my momma doesn't know how to discipline kids and the next day and the next day, I was mad." Michael: "No, cause I've moved into my neighborhood last year. My old neighborhood was apartments, um well not really."

Question 15: How do you think being an African American male has impacted your learning?	**Chris:** "It hasn't because um, I figured I was an African American, not um, I wasn't surprised." **Chris:** "Yeah, this morning, teacher was giving points for sitting down like he said, everybody who was black, but they were still sitting down they didn't get points. Then he started picking the black people."
Being a black male, have you felt any differently being in a classroom with other peers?	**Michael:** "Like people was making sounds like they always do. So we, cause sometimes we will have to restart our quiet time cause they make sounds and stuff." **James:** "So basically, like I told you this before, we have to do like two or one minutes after recess or gym or lunch. People be loud and then as they keep being loud, he'll just put minutes on the board." **Chris:** "Um, well, when you were here, everybody kept on talking, even when he said stop talking and we had line up like three or four times because people kept on talking."
Question 16: Describe to me some of the consequences as a class you have to do. How does	**Michael:** It makes me feel pretty mad at them because we won't get that much time to eat or play or have RTI like specials." **James:** "We have to repeat the same thing, we have to repeat if we line up so if people are talking we have to

that impact you? How does that make you feel?	line up again. It makes me feel mad because I want to go to recess." **Chris:** "I get mad at them because at certain times I feel different stuff because it's just certain people when they keep on doing it." "I stand at the door because I'm hungry. At specials I'm waiting patiently because we have 45 minutes, so we have time to do that. But when we people keep making noises it just gets on my nerves and people keep saying it's not me but we know it's them."
Question 17: Do you think you have a positive relationship with your classmates or negative? What makes you feel that way?	**Chris:** It's more of the people on that side of the room." "It's just like, some people just want to hurry up and do stuff and some people just want to keep talking." "I would say 20% positive 80% negative." **James:** "Sometimes, 80% not, 40% yes. The three of us have a positive relationship. **Michael:** "20% negative, it's like some of the boys expect a few. It's really not the girls." "One boy talks bad about people and stuff and always telling people to shut up and he talks about people moms."

	Chris: "The kid #1 is talking about he keeps telling us to shut up, shut up when we try to help him not get into trouble."
Question 18: What did it feel like to be home with family for Fall Break?	**Chris:** "Felt good because we do a lot of things at my dad's and my mom's house. At my dad's house we go to my cousin's house or go into our neighbor's house. We were able to play Minecraft. At mom's house we clean up, but then we can go inside people's house." **Michael:** "It feels good because we went to Pancho's and my mom allowed me to get a little kid drink. My cousins came over and we played football. When my mom and dad had to work, we went over my Nana's house." **James:** "It feel fine because you get to be around family." "We were going to Gatlinburg for my sister's birthday but she was acting up on her birthday." "I barely get to see my dad. I can see him over my grannies house." My granny is in a nursing home right now because she had surgery on her hip."
Question 19: When you came back to school on Monday, what was the	**Michael:** "To see my friends, talk and play with them." **Chris**: "Gym because we were going to come back and play elimination and that is one of my favorite games."

one thing that you were excited about?	**James:** "To see my teacher because she said she would be back after Fall Break because she said she would be back in November."
Question 20: Has there ever been a time where your teachers say something to you or taught you something and you felt like the teacher may not have been right?	**Michael:** "I think she be right, because we would talk about solid and what you could mix it up with. Solid and gasoline and we also look at pictures." **Chris:** "Sometimes the teacher is not right. Whenever we do our multiplication, Rocket Math, when I get my test back, I put 24 for 8 x3, it comes back with 36." **James:** "I don't know." **Michael:** "Sometimes he will write the wrong question."
Question 21: When you come to school every day, do you walk away with having learned something that was valuable to you?	**Chris**: "No, because we learn the same thing every day. If we are learning about renewed energy and non-renewable energy we barely do anything else to learn. We have learned everything there is to know about that stuff. **James**: "Sometimes we learn about some things then we learn about something then we learn about the same thing and it gets annoying." **Michael:** "I agree with student 3 just a little because we will learn about solid and gasoline all the time and we go to the same page over and over."

Question 22: What do you think your parents are most proud of about your schooling experiences?	**Chris:** "Um, about my grades because I get good grades. My dad bought me the highest amount of V Bucks and some more stuff." "My momma basically had an early Christmas." **Michael:** "I think they are proud of grades because when I came home with my report card, she be happy at me. And when my papa sees my report card, he said he's going to buy me stuff. And, um all my tests cause my mom looking at my tests too." **James:** "Um, my grades because uh like this report card I have a bunch of 100's and one C. I had got money."
Question 23: What are you most proud of about your learning experiences? What do your grades mean to you and your future?	**James:** "That I good grades, and I'm doing good in school." "So I can get my education." **Chris:** "My grades and my future are going to get me to get a job and get a job application. So then, I don't know about some stuff, but what I do know about are things I need to work on in a certain job and my future to work on and go back to college and work on some stuff." **Michael:** "I think about my work because when the teacher checks my work, he said sometimes I do good and stuff, well just sometimes." "It means that I'm doing

	good when I grow up and go to high school, I'm going to pass high school."
Question 24: What area of your schooling experiences is your weakest subject area that you need the work in and do you think your parents and teachers support you in that area?	**Chris**: "I'm in the weakest in social studies because my parents support me on math and reading and my mom tries to support me on whatever she knows about. I have an imagination that sometimes gets me good compliments in social studies." **James:** "Sometimes math because if I get a bad grade in math, the teacher will retest to boost the grade up." "My parents do support me in math." **Michael:** "Math is my weakest subject." "Yes, my teacher supports me and last year my parents help me in math."
Question 25: When you grow up and you think about your future jobs, what do your parents say to you about jobs they would like to see you become?	**James:** "NBA, because I am good at basketball. My mom talks to me about basketball or football." **Michael:** "Baseball or football, because I played baseball last year. I haven't played football, but my dad thinks that I am ready for football." **Chris:** "I want to do basketball and I want to be on the Lakers." "My dad said I am good at basketball, and I can do every special move a basketball can do."

Question 26: What do you think about your grades and your academic success how will that tie into your future careers?	**Chris:** "When it's time to work, I have to do whatever I have to do because if I don't do that, my future might be messed up so then I might not be able to do what I want to do." **James:** "Wait, I have a question, do you have to get an education to play sports? "I really want to get my education. " **Michael:** "I think good because when I have good grades, my mom asked if I wanted to play baseball and I said yes." "And I think it's good for me to play sports."
Question 27: When you think about schooling experiences, home, parents and siblings, what are some things that help you to be the person that you are?	**Chris:** "My dad because he teachers me everything I know even though he doesn't live with me." "We still read books and he help me with my homework and my mom kinda with my social studies." **James:** "My teacher because he tells people to worry about themselves because he said be yourself." **Michael:** "My niece. She helps me because last year I was in homeschool and she helped me a lot."
Question 28: What or who is not helping you to be the best person you can be?	**Chris:** "My neighbors because people knocking on my door asking if I can come outside. Whenever I am trying to do something that is learning, they keep knocking on my door and then I can't concentrate."

	James: "People in our class. When we are doing a test, people do something and then blame it on you." **Michael:** "A boy making noises and he says it is other people." "There's no one at home that is not helping me except my four-year-old sister."

APPENDIX B

Student Written Response Questions

1. What are your thoughts about sharing your personal learning experiences among peers?

2. In your opinion, how has sharing in the focus group sessions shaped your learning experiences?

APPENDIX C

Informed Consent for Parents

PARENTAL INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Dear Parents,

My name is Angela Summers, and I am a doctoral candidate at Middle Tennessee State University. I am planning a research project involving African American fourth grade male students. This communication is a request for you to allow your child to participate in this research study. Involvement in this study is voluntary and has no influence on your child's grade or classroom performance. A brief summary of this study is provided below, and I will gladly answer any questions or give further explanation regarding the study. I will gladly answer any questions or give explanation in greater detail.

Brief Description of Research Study

The purpose of the research is to interview African American male fourth grade students to provide an opportunity to share their personal experiences in elementary school. I wish to hear what they have to say, their perspectives of feeling connected, belonging, and their disconnection to classroom learning. During this eight-week study, students will be observed in their natural classroom settings weekly. Additionally, students will be placed in focus groups (peer groups) for weekly interview sessions. A copy of the interview questions will be given to the school principal, Mr. Busch and made available to parents upon request.

Details of the Child's Involvement

The research study timeline consists of eight weeks that are inclusive of classroom observations and focus group interviews in the context of your child's school. Interviews will be recorded for later transcription (written record) for the researcher to track your child's response to interview questions accurately. The information collected from your child will be used only to provide answers to research questions.

Privacy and Confidentiality

The researcher will keep and store all information collected in a safe and locked office at MTSU. Your child's participation will be kept confidential. I will not reveal any private information about your child to anyone unless required by law. Observation records will be in my possession and your child's name will be replaced with a number that only I can match for identification purposes. Only the chair of my dissertation committee will have any knowledge of students' data and once the study is complete all information and data will be permanently destroyed.

The only exception to the privacy statement above is dictated by Tennessee Law. Tennessee Law mandates report by any person who has knowledge of physical or mental harm to a child if: (1) the nature of the harm reasonably indicates it was caused by brutality, abuse, or neglect; or (2) on the basis of available information, the harm reasonably appears to have been caused by brutality, abuse, or neglect. In the event such indications should occur, the researcher will contact the school counselor for proper reporting methods. The Tennessee mandatory reporting laws define a child as a person under the age of 18.

Risk and Benefits of Participation

There is no physical risk involved while the research is being conducted, nor will your child be transferred from school property at any point. I am a public educator and have direct experience with fourth-grade students. Therefore, I understand the need for safety and reassurance. Although there are no monetary rewards for your child as he takes part in the research, this research study provides an opportunity for the participant to tell his side of the story about schooling experiences privately without judgment, criticism, or risk of schooling staff involved in this research process.

Participants Rights

You are encouraged to ask questions during the study. There is no penalty if you choose for your child not to participate in the study. You can withdraw your child from this study at any time by simply contacting the researcher via email as provided below.

To be Completed by Participant

I have read all the information on this form about my child participation. I choose, voluntarily, to permit my child to take part in this research study. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.

_____
 Print name of child / Date

_____
 Print name of parent or legally authorized representative

Contact Information

For more information about this research at any interval, please contact me ays2g@mtmail.mtsu.edu or my university supervisor Dr. Donald Snead, Donald.snead@mtsu.edu.

Please return this form within seven days. Thank you for your time and consideration.

APPENDIX D

Informed Child Assent Forms

Study Name:
>   The Voices of African American Adolescent Males: Students Schooling
>   Experience in Urban Schools.

Principal Investigator*:*
>   Angela Summers, Doctoral Candidate of Assessment Learning & School
>   Improvement Program

Dissertation Chair*:*
>   Dr. Donald Snead

PLEASE READ THIS DOCUMENT CAREFULLY. YOUR SIGNATURE IS REQUIRED

I am Angela Summers for Middle Tennessee State University. I am doing a study to figure out how African American fourth-grade male students feel about their schooling experience. I am asking you to take part in the research study because you are African American and I want to know your feelings and thoughts. All your answers will be kept private and will not be shown to your teachers, parents/guardian or any school official. Only people who are on my research committee will see them. Also, once I have gotten the information from you, I will insert a false name to your recorded answers.

We do not believe that any big problems or risks will happen to you as part of this study. However, you can feel good about helping us to explain the thinking and feelings of African American male students so that we can make education opportunities bigger and better than presently.

You should know that:
- You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. You will not get into any trouble with MTSU, your teacher or the school if you say no.
- You may stop being in the study at any time. If there is a question you don't want to answer, just say so and we will leave it blank.
- Your parents/guardian(s) were asked if it is ok for you to be in this study. Even if they say it is ok, it is still your choice of taking part or not taking part.
- You can ask any questions you have now or later. If you have questions later, you or your parents can contact me at: ays2g@mtmail.mtsu.edu or (615) 981-7784. You may also contact Dr. Snead at: Donald.snead@mtsu.edu or (931) 216-0739.

Yes, I am willing to participate in the study _____(Print Name)

No, I am not willing to participate in the study _____(Print Name)

_____   _____   _____
Your signature   Print   Date

_____
Name of Parent(s) or Legal Guardian(s)

_____   _____   _____
Researcher Signature   Print   Date

APPENDIX E

Participant Debrief Form

Debriefing Student Form

Thank you for taking part in this research on: The Voices of African American Adolescent Males Schooling Experiences in Urban Schools.

Please read and complete the enclosed form to debrief your information captured by the researcher during focus group interview sessions. Please do not hesitate to ask any questions you may have concerning copies your transcript. Should you sign yes, you are also granting permission to use this information for the purpose of research.

I have read all questions and comments I have made for each question.

Yes, this information is accurate _____.

No, this is not the correct response on number _____.

My response should be recorded as:

_____

_____