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Examining the Retention of African American Males in Ninth Grade as a Roadblock to Graduation: Charting Student Perceptions

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Examining the Retention of African American Males in Ninth Grade as a Roadblock to Graduation: Charting Student Perceptions

Abstract

In the United States, more students are being retained in the ninth grade than in any other year in their K-12 school experience (Blackwell, 2008). In addition, African American males are retained more than any other group (Morrison, 2014). Studies show that when students, especially African American males, are retained in ninth grade there is an increased probability that they will drop out and consequently, fail to graduate from high school. The limitation of the majority of the prior studies on ninth-grade retention is their focus on urban districts. Thus, it is unknown if the probability of ninth-grade retention and the impact of that setback is significant in suburban, integrated settings where African Americans make up smaller, yet emerging percentage of the student population. While the gravity of these issues is documented, there have been few studies on the barriers to the academic success of African American students in suburban, integrated environments. The purpose of this study is to examine the ninth grade experiences of African American males in a high school in a suburban community of New York City. The study participants consisted of three African American males who were retained in ninth grade, and three African American males who successfully completed ninth grade and are currently enrolled as 10th and 12th grade students. The study provides insight to what these students report about the factors that contributed to their academic achievement and barriers to their success. A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing in-depth interviews and the students' school records as the main sources of data collection.

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Examining the Retention of African American Males in Ninth Grade as a Roadblock to
Graduation: Charting Student Perceptions

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by

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Dedication

This dissertation is submitted with great appreciation for all those who have supported and encouraged me throughout this journey. It would be simply impossible to mention everyone. Yet, I wish to offer special thanks (first and foremost) to my Heavenly Father, who has graced me to complete this race. His divine wisdom, direction, and strength enabled me to write this vision.

I would also like to offer a special word of thanks to my parents, Kenneth and Vivian Smith. I am truly grateful for your unfailing love, support and encouragement that helped me get through this process. I also thank my sister Adrienne and my niece Donovan for being my cheerleaders along this journey.

I would also like to offer my sincerest gratitude to my dissertation chair, Dr. Frances Wills. I will always appreciate your words of wisdom, your patience, and guidance that helped me realize the true value of this work.

Lastly, I want to thank Stacey Spencer. Your love, patience, and constant support meant the world to me, and I could not have done this without you.

Biographical Sketch

Tracy Smith is currently the Assistant Principal at Nyack High School. Ms. Smith attended the University of Illinois at Chicago from 1990-1994 and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1994. She attended Teachers College Columbia University from 1997-2003 and graduated with a Master of Arts degree (in 1998) and a Master of Education degree (in 2003). She came to St. John Fisher College in the spring of 2013 and began doctoral studies in the Ed.D. program in Executive Leadership. Ms. Smith pursued her research in African American male achievement under the direction of Dr. Frances Wills and Dr. Shelley Jallow and received the Ed.D. degree in 2015.

Abstract

In the United States, more students are being retained in the ninth grade than in any other year in their K-12 school experience (Blackwell, 2008). In addition, African American males are retained more than any other group (Morrison, 2014). Studies show that when students, especially African American males, are retained in ninth grade there is an increased probability that they will drop out and consequently, fail to graduate from high school. The limitation of the majority of the prior studies on ninth-grade retention is their focus on urban districts. Thus, it is unknown if the probability of ninth-grade retention and the impact of that setback is significant in suburban, integrated settings where African Americans make up smaller, yet emerging percentage of the student population. While the gravity of these issues is documented, there have been few studies on the barriers to the academic success of African American students in suburban, integrated environments.

The purpose of this study is to examine the ninth grade experiences of African American males in a high school in a suburban community of New York City. The study participants consisted of three African American males who were retained in ninth grade, and three African American males who successfully completed ninth grade and are currently enrolled as 10th and 12th grade students. The study provides insight to what these students report about the factors that contributed to their academic achievement and barriers to their success. A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing in-depth interviews and the students' school records as the main sources of data collection.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

The quality of the ninth-grade transition experience remains one of the major concerns in addressing the high school dropout crisis (Featherston, 2010). “Across all students, ninth graders have the highest dropout rate: this pattern persists for Blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans and for male students” (Stearns & Glennie, 2006, p. 29). It is estimated that at least two million students are held back each year, with Black males having the highest risk for retention (Jimerson, Kaufman, & Anderson, 2004). “From grades 3-10, Black students represented the largest single racial or ethnic group held back” (Robelin, Adams, & Shah, 2012, p.3). Ninth grade is a challenging year for all students; however, African American males are experiencing a significantly greater level of difficulty than any other ethnic group and consequently, are not graduating from high school (Jenkins, 2010). Because this year is critical to high school completion, this study examines the ninth-grade year experience for African American males.

Problem Statement

In the United States, more students are being retained in the ninth grade than in any other grade (Blackwell, 2008). Statistics show that the highest retention rates are found among poor, minority, inner-city youth (Jimerson et al., 2004). According to the Neild study (2009), in large urban environments, teachers assigned to ninth grade tend to be uncertified or new to the profession. Although the lack of teacher efficacy and the implication of the inequality of teacher assignments are frequently cited as barriers to the

academic achievement of African American males in urban environments, there has been little attention paid to the factors that contribute to or hinder the academic success of African American males in suburban environments. While the gravity of these issues is documented in urban environments, there have been limited studies on the barriers to the academic success of African American students in suburban environments.

Retention studies reveal that students who are retained in ninth grade have a higher probability of dropping out of school (Blackwell, 2008). The limitation of the studies is that it is unknown if this probability is higher in suburban settings where African Americans make up a smaller percentage of the student population.

“Approximately one third of all African Americans live in suburban communities, and their children are attending suburban schools” (Gordon, 2012, p. 1). The articles, case studies, and dissertations reviewed for this study emphasize the overall problem of African American students dropping out of school after failing to pass ninth grade (Brenner & Graham, 2009; Hudley & Taylor, 1998; Jimerson et al., 2004; Neild, 2009; Trejos, 2004). The limitations of the studies have been the lack of emphasis placed on the retention of African American males in ninth grade, specifically in suburban communities and identifiable strategies that encourage African American male achievement. There have also been limited studies on the connection between the retention of African American males in ninth grade and the impact of ninth-grade retention on society.

Recent studies on Black men suggest that a Black male in his late 20s who failed to earn a high school diploma is more likely to be incarcerated than to be working (Lawrence, 2011). When African American males fail to successfully complete ninth grade and subsequently drop out of school, their potential for employment decreases and

the probability of engaging in criminal activity increases (Sweeten, Bushway, & Paternoster, 2009). Farrington (as cited in Sweeten et al., 2009) found in his study of male high school dropouts, ages 16-32, that they had higher reports of violent crime and had accumulated more criminal convictions between the ages of 10 and 32 than those who completed high school (Sweeten et al., 2009). High school dropouts are also a burden on the nation's economy (Sweeten et al., 2009).

According to the U.S. Department of Labor statistics, high school dropouts are more likely to be unemployed than high school graduates (2004). Researchers estimate that if the approximately 1.2 million youth who are likely to drop out of school this year earned their high school diplomas instead, they could save states more than \$17 billion over the course of their lives (Sweeten et al., 2009).

Furthermore, high school graduates are thought to be healthier than dropouts. Due to a lack of career opportunities for dropouts, they are less likely to have health insurance (Sweeten et al., 2009). Unemployment, economic hardship, incarceration, and poor health outcomes are the profound effects of failing to earn a high school diploma as a result of being retained in ninth grade. The plight of African American males, the advancement of the Black middle and upper class, and the state of the nation's economy are at stake and indeed may be traced at least in part to a failure to graduate from high school due to a lack of a quality experience in ninth grade.

Theoretical Rationale

The study was grounded in critical race theory (CRT) (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006) as the framework for analysis. CRT provides the foundation for understanding the narratives of the disenfranchised (Powers, 2007). Supporting CRT were four related

theoretical concepts that were applied to the data analysis: stereotype threat (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008), growth mindset (Dweck, 2012), mattering to others (Tucker, Dixon, & Griddine, 2010), and resiliency (Samel, Sondergeld, Fisher, & Patterson, 2011).

Critical race theory. Critical race theory (CRT) aims to challenge conventional accounts of educational and other institutions and the social processes that occur within them (Powers, 2007). Originating during the 1970s, CRT was developed as a result of lawyers, activists, and legal scholars coming together to speak out against the stalled efforts of the civil rights era (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). “Critical race theorists argue that because racism is such an ingrained feature of society, it is embedded in practices and values that have been shorn of the more explicit and formal manifestations of racialized power” (Delgado et al., 2012, p. 131).

There are three basic tenets of CRT. The first tenet holds that “Racism is difficult to address or cure because it is not acknowledged” (Delgado et al., 2012, p. 8). This tenet expresses the idea that taking a colorblind approach to issues of inequality does not address the root issues of discrimination (Delgado et al., 2012). The second tenet called Interest Convergence, posits the idea that racism advances the larger segments of society and therefore, there is not much incentive to abolish it (Delgado et al., 2012). Derrick Bell (as cited in Delgado et al., 2012) was one of the founders and early proponents of CRT. He argued that the Brown v. Board of Education decision was not derived from a desire to help Blacks, but may have resulted from the “self-interest of elite Whites” (Delgado et al., 2012, p. 8). The third tenet of CRT, called the social construction thesis, claims that “races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when

convenient” (Delgado et al., 2012, p. 8). This tenet expresses the idea that society imposes racial classifications that unjustly labels classes of people based on their physical traits, which only speaks to “ a small portion of their genetic endowment” (Delgado et al., 2012, p. 8).

Further, CRT utilizes the narrative of the disenfranchised to expose the racial injustices that exist within institutions (Powers, 2007). “One of the main goals of CRT is to use storytelling and narrative to examine race and racism” (Dixson et al., 2006, p. 11). Bell’s narrative about his tenure denial from Harvard Law School sparked a student boycott and the initial discussion about race and law (Powers, 2007). Although CRT has its roots in legal analysis, it has been used by educational researchers to analyze institutional racism in educational settings (Powers, 2007). In examining the racial disparities that exist between African American males and their White counterparts, CRT is an appropriate lens by which to analyze this issue and will be utilized as the primary theory for this qualitative study. The social and racial factors that contribute to the widening achievement gap between African American males and their White peers may be best understood through the theoretical framework of CRT.

Stereotype threat. Stereotype threat is the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype and the associated fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm the stereotype (Ford et al., 2008). Steele’s research (as cited in Ford et al., 2008) indicates that Black students are vulnerable to stereotypes associated with Blacks and their perceived intellectual ability. Steele contends that some Black students perform more poorly than their White counterparts due to less academic motivation and other contributing factors; however, when Black students believe that

their intelligence is being evaluated, there is an increased probability of these students failing to achieve academic success (Ford et al., 2008). In various studies on stereotype threat, Steele found that when Black students were told prior to being tested, that the test being administered would measure their intellectual ability, students' confidence and subsequent performance were negatively impacted (Ford et al., 2008).

Further research by Steele and Aronson (as cited in Ford et al., 2008) on stereotype threat revealed that simply checking a box to indicate your racial ethnicity or gender (on a standardized test) can trigger a stereotype in your mind and potentially lower your score (Dweck, 2006). Steele and Aronson posit that anything that reminds you that you're Black or female before taking a test in a subject that you are stereotypically perceived as incapable of mastering will lower your test score (Dweck, 2006). They argue that when stereotypes are evoked, they consume people's minds with distracting thoughts about their abilities and they consequently worry about confirming the stereotype (Dweck, 2006). Stereotype threat will not be utilized as a primary theory for this study; however, it will be used as a sub theory to help inform data analysis. In addition to conceptualizing their racial identities and grappling with perceived discrimination and stereotypes, African American adolescents struggle with their academic identities.

Two mindsets: A fixed mindset versus a growth mindset. A fixed mindset is the belief that your current qualities and abilities are an accurate reflection of what you will become. People with a fixed mindset are difficult to convince that they can one day achieve success if they have experienced failure all of their lives. They believe that they can never develop or acquire more ability or intelligence than they already possess.

Dweck (2012) posits that people with a fixed mindset or a belief in fixed traits “are always in danger of being measured by a failure. It can define them in a permanent way” (p. 39). However, a growth mindset is based on the premise that your basic skills and abilities are things you cultivate through time and effort (Dweck, 2012). People with a growth mindset are not scarred by failure; they see it as an opportunity to develop. Dweck’s work on mindsets will be utilized as a sub theory to help inform data analysis for this qualitative study.

Mattering to others at school. Despite the overwhelmingly negative statistics and studies that emphasize the academic failures of African American male students, there have been limited studies on the academic success of African American males. In contrast to the racial and social implications that contribute to the retention and dropout rates of Black males, there are identifiable strategies and constructs that promote their achievement. Mattering to others is a psychosocial construct that has been studied with younger and older adolescents, college students, adults, children and their fathers, corporations, and school counselors (Tucker et al., 2010).

In contrast to stereotype threat, mattering to others is defined as the experience of moving through life being noticed by and feeling special to others who also matter to us (Tucker et al., 2010). William James (as cited in Tucker et al., 2010) asserted that one of the great injustices in the world would be to live life being unnoticed by others. Mattering to others has been placed, in terms of importance, behind Maslow’s safety needs and basic physiological needs (Tucker et al., 2010). This social construct is considered to be a psychosocial experience of feeling important and significant to others, through which

individuals perceive their relevance in relation to specific others, such as family members, friends, colleagues, and others (Tucker et al., 2010).

Studies show that teachers and other adults that students encounter in schools have a strong impact on student success (Samel et al., 2011). When teachers show a vested interest in their students' success, students internalize this interest and it's reflected in their attitudes towards achievement and ultimately staying in school (Neely & Griffin-Williams, 2013). "When a teacher cares, the student is taught to care; when a teacher does not care, the student displays an attitude of not caring; being the reasons as to why students drop out of school and engage in juvenile delinquent acts" (Neely et al., 2013, p. 68). Ninth-grade students in retention case studies have reported that "they disengage from school when they feel teachers don't care about getting to know them as individuals" (Wheelock & Miao, 2005, p. 4). Creating an environment where students feel a sense of relevancy and that their teachers care about them is key to building a healthy school climate, which is a significant factor in the success of all students (Tucker et al., 2010). The social construct of mattering to others will be used as a sub theory to help inform data analysis for this qualitative study.

Resiliency. Factors that contribute to the academic success of students dealing with adversative circumstances such as poverty, parents with low levels of education, low educational expectations, and a lack of student aspirations have been grouped under the construct of resilience (Samel et al., 2011). Similar to the concepts of stereotype theory and mattering to others, resiliency includes teachers' beliefs about their students, students' problem solving and communication skills, and external factors such as family, community support, and academic support (Samel et al., 2011). When teachers and

schools work effectively together to increase resiliency students can obtain academic success (Samel et al., 2011). Resiliency will be used as a sub theory to help inform data analysis for this qualitative study.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the transition experience of ninth-grade African American students. Thus, the study focused on the factors identified by students that contributed to or hindered their academic achievement in suburban high school settings. The study informs the research on the factors that African American male students in a suburban high school have identified as contributing to their successful completion of ninth grade as well as the barriers to academic achievement that the students identify as leading to their failure to complete high school in suburban communities. The study also comments on the social and cultural factors that are prevalent in suburban schools and may contribute to the academic success or failure of Black males.

Research Questions

In order to study the effects and quality of the ninth-grade experience of African American males, this study examined the following questions:

1. What factors do African American males, who complete ninth grade in a suburban high school, identify as contributing to their success?
 - 1a. What strategies do African American males report as using to overcome barriers they identify?

1b. To what extent do those students who have succeeded in completing ninth grade in a suburban high school refer to teacher efficacy as a contributing to their success?

1c. To what extent do those students, who have succeeded in completing ninth grade in a suburban high school, refer to the existence of cultural responsiveness in their schools as contributing to their success?

1d .To what extent do African American male students, who succeed in ninth grade in suburban high schools, attribute their success as a consequence of attending a suburban high school?

2. What factors do African American males, who fail to complete ninth grade in a suburban high school, identify as contributing to their failure?

2a. What strategies do African American males, who fail to complete ninth grade in a suburban high school, report that they attempted to use to help them succeed?

2b. To what extent do those students, who failed to complete ninth grade in a suburban high school identify teacher efficacy as a hindrance to their success?

2c. To what extent do those students, who failed to complete ninth grade in a suburban high school refer to the lack of cultural responsiveness in their schools as a hindrance to their success?

2d .To what extent do African American male students, who failed to complete ninth grade in a suburban high school, attribute their failure as a consequence of attending a suburban high school?

Potential Significance of the Study

Research findings confirm that African American males are experiencing a lack of academic success at significantly higher rates than their White peers (Robelen et al., 2012). “For the past 20 years, African American males, as a group, have had lower graduation rates, lower standardized test scores, and higher dropout rates when compared to their female and European American counterparts” (Irving & Hudley, 2008, p. 681). African American males have demonstrated difficulty with successfully passing ninth grade and are subsequently dropping out of high school at alarming rates (Fulk, 2003). Researchers have found that “academic failure during the transition to high school is directly linked to the probability of dropping out of high school” (Jenkins, 2010, p. 2).

Studies confirm that there are social and racial implications that contribute to the academic failure of African American males. When educators fail to acknowledge the varied identities of African American males and these students perceive that they are not valuable members of the school community, they become academically disengaged and subsequently, drop out of school (Ogbu, 2003; Tucker et al., 2010). Statistics show that when Black males drop out of school they are at greater risk for delinquent and criminal behavior (Sweeten et al., 2009). It has been argued that the long term consequences for dropping out of high school for both the student and society are profound and worthy of attention.

Definitions of Terms

Black and African American: The terms are used interchangeably in this paper to refer to people of African descent. African American refers to people of African descent who are nationally identified with the United States (Morris, 2014).

Culturally responsive: the term refers to the interdependent relationship between the home/community culture of the student and the school culture (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The term is also used interchangeably in this paper with the term cultural awareness and cultural competence.

Dropout: The term is defined as a failure to complete school (Morris, 2014).

Grade retention: The term is defined as the practice of not promoting students to the next grade level (Jimerson et al., 1997). Retention is also defined as the act of being held back after failing to earn enough credits to progress to the next grade level.

Hispanic and Latino: The terms are used interchangeably in this paper to refer to persons of Latin-American or Spanish descent living in the United States.

Middle School: The term is defined as sixth, seventh, and eighth grade, with eighth grade being the last year before entering high school.

High School: The term is defined as grades 9-12.

Ninth grade: The term is defined as the first year of high school, the year immediately following the completion of middle school. It is most often cited in the literature as the transition year.

Suburban settings: The term is used interchangeably with integrated setting to denote an environment that consists of an economically and racially diverse residential community located on the outskirts of a city.

Teacher efficacy: The term is used interchangeably with teacher effectiveness. It refers to a teacher's belief in his or her ability to positively impact student learning (Protheroe, 2008).

White: The term is used in this paper to refer to people whose racial heritage is Caucasian.

Chapter Summary

African American males are experiencing a lack of academic success at significantly higher rates than their White peers (Robelen et al., 2012). “For the past 20 years, African American males, as a group, have had lower graduation rates, lower standardized test scores, and higher dropout rates when compared to their female and European American counterparts” (Irving & Hudley, 2008, p.681). African American males have demonstrated difficulty with successfully passing ninth grade and consequently are dropping out of high school at alarming rates (Fulk, 2003). Researchers have found that “academic failure during the transition to high school is directly linked to the probability of dropping out of high school” (Jenkins, 2010, p. 2).

Due to the social and racial barriers that lead to early academic disengagement, many African American males are retained and subsequently fail to earn their high school diplomas. The failure to complete high school is an impetus for delinquent behavior and limited post-secondary opportunities. Studies show that when African American males drop out of high school, the likelihood that they will engage in criminal activity and subsequently experience unemployment and incarceration increases (Sweeten et al., 2009). The retention of African American males in ninth grade results in long term consequences that affect both the student and society.

This study examined the transition experience of ninth grade African American students, and the factors they identified that contributed to or hindered their academic achievement in a suburban high school setting. Chapter 2 provides a review of the

literature and the theories utilized in the study. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology of using qualitative research through the use of interviews to investigate the ninth grade experiences, and other school experiences of the African American males who participated in the study. Chapter 4 presents the findings that emerged from the interviews. This chapter is organized by the research questions and the major themes that were identified by the participants. Chapter 5 presents the researcher's insights and recommendations on what schools can do to improve the ninth grade transition experience of African American males.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction and Purpose

Ninth grade is a critical year for students (Neild, 2009). The rate of success achieved during this year can determine the probability of students graduating from high school. In the ninth grade, students must earn passing grades in core courses that carry credits required for graduation (Fulk, 2003). Further, the transition from middle school to high school has been described as a roadblock to high school graduation for African American males (Jenkins, 2010). Recent statistics suggest that “One of every three eighth-grade students in the United States does not graduate from high school, and half of Black and Latino students do not make it to graduation day” (Brown, Dedmond, & LaFauci, 2006, p. 1). This study examined the experience of African American males in ninth grade in suburban high schools in terms of the barriers they face that impede their success as well as promote their academic achievement.

Retention studies have found that Black and Hispanic males have the highest risk for retention (Jimerson et al., 2004). Retention is defined as the act of being retained or held back after failing to earn enough credits to progress to the next grade level.

“Twenty-nine percent of Black ninth grade males have been retained or ‘held back’ at some point between kindergarten and ninth grade, compared with 20 percent of Latino and 11 percent of White ninth-grade males” (Morris, 2014, p. 16). In addition, the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) data collection for the 2011-2012 school year revealed that across all grade levels, there were disparities in retention by race and ethnicity (Robelen et al.,

2012). African American students had the highest rate of retention at 4.2%, followed by Hispanics at 2.9%, Native Americans at 1.9%, and Whites at 1.5% (Robelen et al., 2012). OCR's retention data also indicated that the retention rate of African American students was disproportionately higher than any other race. "From grades 3-10, Black students represented the largest single racial or ethnic group held back" (Robelen et al., 2012, p. 3). Studies show that when students, especially African American male students, are retained in ninth grade there is an increased probability that they will drop out and consequently, fail to graduate from high school (Brown, Dancy, & Davis, 2013). In a report published by the Schott Foundation for Public Education (2004), "In most school districts, up to 70 percent of Black boys who enter 9th grade do not graduate four years later with their peers" (Brown et al., 2013, p. 70). According to compulsory state education law, dropout is defined as a failure to complete school (Morris, 2014).

Further studies on dropout rates indicate that students, especially African American males, tend to drop out of high school either during or shortly after ninth grade (Jenkins, 2010). "Researchers have found that 'academic failure during the transition to high school is directly linked to the probability of dropping out of high school'" (Jenkins, 2010, p. 2). Recent reports in some large-city school systems indicate that more than 50% of students leave high school without earning a diploma (Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2008). A large proportion of these dropouts have not earned enough credits to be promoted beyond ninth grade (Neild et al., 2008). When students drop out of school, their opportunities for economic success or access to higher education are limited. "Only 5 percent of Black high school dropouts ages 18 to 25 held a job for two years or more, compared to 8 percent of their Black counterparts with a high school diploma"

(Morris, 2014, p. 15). The consequences of dropping out of high school for African American males extend beyond limited employment and economic advancement.

A long term consequence of dropping out of high school is incarceration. It has been argued that high school dropouts are considered to be at a greater risk for participation in delinquent and criminal behavior (Sweeten et al., 2009). “Approximately 68 percent of state prison inmates, 50 percent of federal inmates, and 60 percent of jail inmates did not obtain their regular high-school degree” (Sweeten et al., 2009, p. 49). Black male high school dropouts were more likely to be incarcerated than employed during the year 2000 (Neild et al., 2008). “In 2010, more young (20-to-34-year-old) African American men without a high school diploma or GED were behind bars (37 percent) than were employed” (26 percent) (Morris, 2014, p. 158). Studies reveal that when Black males fail to complete ninth grade, the likelihood of completing high school decreases, while the probability of being unemployed and incarcerated increases (Jenkins, 2010; Morris, 2014; Sweeten et al., 2009).

CRT studies. By utilizing the story of the disenfranchised, CRT serves as a lens by which the story of adolescents of color can be told (Dixson et al., 2006). Ogbu (2003), an advocate of CRT, postulated that the story of minority students is often in conflict with their academic success. Ogbu contends that minority students bring a set of cultural beliefs and behaviors about education into school, which affects their level of academic success. According to Ogbu, Black students reject the values and morals of the mainstream population because they feel as if they are compromising their identity as African Americans to conform to what the mainstream deem as correct and acceptable (Jenkins, 2010; Ogbu, 2003). Ogbu contended that acceptance of mainstream values

about academic achievement may pose an identity conflict for African American students (Hudley, Graham, & Taylor, 1998).

Research shows that there is a correlation between the racial identities of African American students and their academic achievement (Brown et al., 2013; Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Gordon, 2012; Khalifa, Dunbar, & Douglas, 2013; Noguera, 2003). Some studies have found that when students hold strong identities as African Americans, their academic achievement suffers and/or academic identification decreases, especially when they view being African American as adversative to academic success (Jones, McLaughlin, & Nasir, 2009). However, in a study of high-achieving African American students, Fordham & Ogbu (as cited in Thompson & Gregory, 2011) found that some African American students may choose to assimilate and deemphasize their African American identity in order to achieve academic success, especially in integrated settings.

Ogbu (2003) examined the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students in a suburban community in Shaker Heights, Ohio. Shaker Heights is an upper middle class suburb on the outskirts of Cleveland, Ohio with a population of 30,000. About one-third of the community was African American. There were other minority groups present, but in small number. The median family income was \$66,000. The Shaker Heights community was known to be well-educated with an estimated 61% of the residents over the age of 25 holding at least a bachelor's degree. The school system was noted as being the best in the nation. It was estimated that 85% of the Shaker Heights high school graduates attended college. Despite the positive demographic and academic data, there was a wide achievement gap between Black and White students.

In Ogbu's (2003) ethnographic study, which utilized school statistical data, he found that despite the fact that many of the African American students came from successful families, many of them still fell behind their White peers. He attributed the achievement gap to several factors: lack of parental involvement, racism, low expectation of Black students, and societal pressures that stem from cultural beliefs about education. He also found that African American students were academically disengaged due to their perceptions of teachers' discrimination. Interviews with Shaker Heights High School faculty revealed that teachers had low expectations for Black students. Other researchers also contend that when African American students perceive that they are being discriminated against, there is a causal link to poor academic achievement (Gordon, 2012; Irving & Hudley, 2008).

Perceptions of discrimination refer to the belief that one has been treated unfairly based on race (Thompson et al., 2011). Studies on racial discrimination reveal that "Adolescents who perceive more discrimination, compared with those who perceive less discrimination or none at all, have lower grades, lower levels of academic engagement, and less academic curiosity and persistence" (Thompson et al., 2003, p. 6). In a similar study (as cited in Thompson et al., 2011), ninth grade reports of perceived discrimination were associated with lower classroom engagement in the 10th grade. This finding revealed that the negative consequences of discrimination not only affect psychological outcomes but also school-related outcomes (Thompson et al., 2011). Casteel (as cited in Thompson et al., 2011) found that African American students tend to feel that their White teachers have difficulty relating to them and consequently their academic achievement is

affected. It could be surmised that experiences of discrimination in the early years of high school can negatively impact how a student performs in the subsequent years.

During the critical time of adolescence in which youth are in search of their identities, African American adolescents are beginning to conceptualize how they are viewed by society. It is the conceptualization of their social and racial identities that impacts their level of perceived discrimination, and subsequently their academic achievement. Green, Way, & Pahl (as cited in Thompson et al., 2011) examined the differences in perception of discrimination among Asian American, Latino, and African American high school students over a period of three years. Findings of the study revealed that African American students demonstrated the steepest increase in perceptions of discrimination from adults over time when compared with other racial/ethnic groups. The negative images and portrayals of African American males by the media have negatively impacted the way in which African American males view themselves. The negative stereotypes of Black males as “lazy, incompetent, unstable, and violent are pervasive throughout American culture” and have proven to be a “burden” on young Black males as they are in search of who they are and what they want to become (Livingston & Nahimana, 2006, p. 212).

Stereotype threat. When Black males identify with the negative stereotypes perpetuated by society about their racial and academic identities, there is a direct correlation to their academic failure. Identification with academics has been defined as the “extent to which individuals base their self-esteem on academic outcomes, feel as though they belong in their academic environment, and value academic achievement” (Thompson et al., 2011, p. 7). A strong academic identification is an indicator of

academic achievement and a decrease in undesirable behaviors (Thompson et al., 2003). Osbourne, Walker, & Rausch (as cited in Thompson et al., 2011) examined the issue of academic identification in a two-year study of ninth and tenth graders. The study showed that students with a strong academic identification upon entry into high school had higher GPAs, lower absenteeism, and fewer behavioral referrals (Thompson et al., 2011). A similar theoretical construct is the concept of a scholar identity (Ford et al., 2008).

Black males are more likely to achieve academically when they have a scholar identity (Ford et al., 2006). A scholar identity is defined as the identity/characteristic one holds as a student (Ford et al., 2006). Whiting (as cited in Ford et al., 2006) contends, “Black males who have a positive scholar identity view themselves as academicians, as studious, as competent and capable, and as intelligent or talented in school settings” (p. 224). The foundation for developing a scholar identity is the issue of self-efficacy. Whiting (as cited in Ford et al., 2006) asserts, “Black males who have a scholar identity have a positive and heightened sense of self efficacy” (p.224). Self-efficacy is the belief that “I can do it; I am competent” (Ford et al., 2006, p. 225). Key to students, especially Black male students, feeling empowered to succeed is how their teachers view them. Teachers play an instrumental role in how students see themselves as scholars. If students perceive that their teachers view them as incompetent and simply as racialized, stereotyped beings, their level of self-efficacy will be negatively impacted (Ford et al., 2006). In his study on academic identity, Toshalis (as cited in Brown et al., 2013) argues that teaching of itself is identity work.

Toshalis asserts that teachers need to be mindful of their students’ varied identities as well as their own in order to have effective classroom experiences with their

Black male students (Brown et al., 2013). African American male students carry multiple identities into the teacher learner exchange (Brown et al., 2013). Toshalis points out that African American male students have a racial, ethnic and gender identity (Brown et al., 2013). Their varied identities are often in conflict with the varied identities of their teachers (i.e. teacher's gender and racial identity). In addition to the racial and social factors that contribute to the retention rates of Black male students and their lack of academic success, having the wrong mindset about themselves and their overall ability is also a factor.

Two mindsets: A fixed mindset versus a growth mindset. Dweck (2012) posits that children develop a fixed or growth mindset as a result of their early educational influences. In one study, Dweck showed a group of fifth graders a closed cardboard box and informed them that there was a test inside. She told them that the test would measure an important educational skill. Dweck asked the students if they believed the test measured how smart they are now and how smart they would become when they grew up. Students with the growth mindset didn't believe that the test could measure how smart they were nor would they accept the fact that the test could measure their future ability. However, students with the fixed mindset believed the test could measure their present and future intelligence/ability. By believing one test could measure their intellect and overall potential, these students were giving the test the power to define them (Dweck, 2012).

In another study on the effect of mindsets, Dweck (2012) surveyed teachers to assess their mindsets and perceptions of students based on their test scores. The survey gave an account of a hypothetical student who earned a 65% on a math test. The only

information given about the student was her gender (female) and name (Jennifer). The survey asked teachers to reveal how they would treat Jennifer based on her test performance. Teachers with the fixed mindset revealed that by knowing Jennifer's score they had a good sense of "who she was and what she was capable of" (Dweck, 2012). Out of all of the teachers surveyed, only one wrote a letter in response to the survey. This teacher commented that with the limited information provided, a sound judgment could not be made about this student's potential. This teacher's response, which reflected the growth mindset, did not compare to the overwhelming fixed mindset responses received. Dweck contends that test scores may be a fair assessment of where students currently are, but they are not predictors of where students could end up.

Teachers with a fixed mindset contribute to the development of fixed traits within their students (Dweck, 2012). Rheinberg (as cited in Dweck 2012) studied teachers with different mindsets. He found that teachers with the fixed mindset believed that if they knew their students' level of ability they could predict their future academic achievement (Dweck, 2012). Teachers with the fixed mindset also believed that they could not influence students' intellectual ability (Dweck, 2012). However, teachers with the growth mindset believed that all children, regardless of ability could develop their skills.

Dweck's (2012) work also speaks to the effects of retention on adolescents and how the very act of retention only serves to contribute to the fixed mindset of those being retained. Dweck asserts:

Most often when kids are behind--say, when they're repeating a grade--they're given dumbed-down material on the assumption that they can't handle more. That idea comes from the fixed mindset: These students are dim-witted, so they need

the same simple things drummed into them over and over... Students repeat the whole grade without learning any more than they knew before (p. 64).

When teachers have a fixed mindset, they limit the achievement of their students. If teachers with a fixed mindset believe that certain students, especially African American students, are not capable of being academically successful, they will negatively impact how students view themselves, and consequently perform (Dweck, 2012).

Mattering to others at school. Mattering to others is a construct that has been used in current studies on the academic success of African American male high school students (Tucker et al., 2010). African American males have been stereotyped as problem students with unpromising futures (Noguera, 2003; Tucker et al., 2010). Findings from the aforementioned studies have concluded that when Black male students perceive that their teachers view them negatively, their academic achievement is negatively impacted (Tucker et al., 2010).

In a study conducted in a public high school in a large Midwestern city, researchers examined how the construct of mattering to others contributed to the success of African American male students (Tucker et al., 2010). The study also examined how mattering to others at school affected the desire of Black male students to achieve academically (Tucker et al., 2010). The school's enrollment during the 2009-2010 school year was 298 students. The student demographics consisted of 47% White, 37% African American, 10% Hispanic and 5% Asian (Tucker et al., 2010). In addition, 48% of the student population qualified for free lunch, and 15% qualified for reduced lunch. The racial and socio-economic demographics of the school were reflective of the general population of the area (Tucker et al., 2010). The study's participants consisted of nine

Black male students who had a 2.0 and above grade point average, and also had good discipline records (Tucker et. al., 2010). The student participants were also juniors in high school. Researchers conducted face-to-face interviews with the participants (Tucker et al., 2010). Students in the study acknowledged that the experience of feeling that they mattered at school, that their opinions were valued by others, and that they were valued as individuals, helped them to overcome academic challenges and stay motivated (Tucker et al., 2010). The participants also noted during their interviews that the level of support they received at school helped them to manage the internal and external pressures of needing to succeed where others in their families had failed (Tucker et al., 2010).

The findings of the study revealed the importance of creating a nurturing school climate in which students, especially African American males who have been marginalized, feel as if they matter at school. The participants in the study disclosed that the evidence of their mattering to others at school was found in the mere fact that their school counselor regularly enquired about their school and personal lives (Tucker et al., 2010). Being noticed by the school counselor and treated as if they were valuable members of the school, played a significant role in their academic success.

Resiliency. Resilience is the ability of an individual to overcome difficult life circumstances, and it has been attributed to the success of many African American students who succeed despite certain life obstacles (Brooks, West-Olatunji, & Baker, 2005). In a study of 18 culturally diverse, high-achieving students in an urban high school, it was revealed that the following factors helped students remain resilient in the midst of adverse life circumstances: supportive adults at home, school, and in the community; involvement in summer enrichment programs and after-school programs; a

network of achieving peers; and a heightened sense of self (Samel et al., 2011). Positive relationships with adults, confidence in one's abilities, and communication of high expectations to youth have also been tied to resilience (Samel et al., 2011; Brooks et al., 2005). Similar to mattering to others, resiliency can be nurtured and developed and therefore, make it possible for African Americans to achieve academic success despite adversity (Brooks et al., 2005; Samel et al., 2011).

Topic Analysis

The transition from middle school to high school has posed a challenge to some students due to increased academic demands. With the increase in state testing and changes to graduation requirements, many incoming ninth graders enter high school unprepared to meet these academic demands. In addition to testing pressures, some students are faced with the challenge of having ninth grade teachers who are uncertified and/or new to the profession (Neild, 2009). Some ninth grade teachers in suburban, integrated environments are also more likely to have less experience with students of color and therefore tend to be less culturally responsive.

High stakes testing. Ninth grade is the “make or break” year in terms of high school success or failure (Fulk, 2003). During this crucial year that marks a turning point in the lives of adolescents, ninth graders experience increased academic demands. They are expected to be independent learners, with less individual attention and monitoring than was experienced in their earlier years of education (Fulk, 2003). With the increase of high stakes testing used to determine promotion, many incoming ninth graders are unprepared for the academic demands of high school and are subsequently retained.

One study investigated the effects of high stakes testing on African American male, eighth-grade students and found that due to literacy skill deficits, they were not eligible for promotion to ninth grade (Murrell-Heydorf, 2011). Prince George County, Maryland reported that 22% of the 12,229 ninth graders in the 2003-2004 school year were retained (Trejos, 2004). African Americans make up the majority of the District's students at 67.4% and only 2.9% of its students are White. The District's superintendent and staff attribute the high retention rates to a lack of academic preparedness. "We're expecting ninth-graders, when they're really fifth-graders" (Trejos, 2004, p. 1). Due to middle school social promotion practices, many students are promoted to ninth grade because of their age rather than academic eligibility. "By the time they get to high school, many are reading at levels below what is expected of a teenager" (Trejos, 2004, p. 1). Academic deficiencies coupled with retention, especially in ninth grade, increase the probability of students dropping out of school. A lack of ninth grade readiness and high stakes testing are not the only contributing factors to the retention of African American male ninth graders. Teacher efficacy is also a contributing factor.

Teacher efficacy. Teacher efficacy has been defined as "a teacher's belief in his or her ability to positively impact student learning" (Protheroe, 2008, p. 43). In a research study conducted in a Midwestern public university, 38 secondary education majors were asked to recall their most effective teacher and why. Three themes emerged from the data results: the teacher's level of enthusiasm, their concern for the learning of all students, and their content knowledge (Breault, 2013). Ashton, Webb, and Doda (as cited in Breault, 2013) conducted a study of 48 high school teachers in which they examined the correlation between teacher efficacy and student achievement. Results from the study

suggests that the following conditions of schools affects a teacher's ability to maintain a strong sense of efficacy: isolation in schools, the difficulty in gauging one's effectiveness as a teacher, the lack of collegial and administrative support, and the sense of powerlessness that stems from limited decision-making abilities (Breault, 2013).

Another research study yielded the following characteristics for higher teacher efficacy: teachers who demonstrate greater levels of planning and organization; teachers who are open to new ideas and methods of instruction to best serve students' needs; and teachers who are less inclined to refer a difficult student to special education (Protheroe, 2008).

Shaughnessy (2004) characterizes teacher efficacy in the following manner: "Teachers who set high goals, who persist, who try another strategy when one approach is found wanting--teachers who have a high sense of efficacy and act on it--are more likely to have students who learn" (Protheroe, 2008, p. 43).

Case studies in large urban districts suggest that teachers who are assigned to teach ninth grade are more likely than teachers in the upper grades to be uncertified, new to the profession, new to the school, or sometimes all three (Neild, 2009). Studies in urban districts have also found that new, inexperienced teachers are "less likely than their more senior colleagues to have the needed classroom management skills, mastery of instructional strategies for ninth graders who need to catch up on academic skills, and access to the various material resources of the school" (Neild, 2009, p. 62). Research findings have indicated that there is a strong correlation between teacher efficacy and student achievement. Studies show that teachers with a low sense of efficacy negatively impact students with low self-esteem and motivation. Students of teachers with a low sense of efficacy suffer losses in perceived self-efficacy and performance expectations in

the transition from elementary to junior high school. This is especially true for students who have a low opinion of their academic capabilities (Robinson, 2004). Some inexperienced teachers may also demonstrate a lack of cultural awareness or responsiveness towards African American students, which could impact the students' level of academic success.

Cultural responsiveness. A teacher's level of cultural responsiveness is also an important factor in the academic achievement of African American students. Cultural responsiveness refers to the interdependent relationship between the home/community culture of the student and the school culture (Ladson-Billings, 1995). If students, especially students of color, perceive their teachers as being culturally insensitive their level of achievement is greatly impacted. Research by Casteel (as cited in Sudderth, 2009) indicated that "African American high school students complained more frequently that White teachers did not relate well to them" (p. 11). Research suggests that there are vast differences between the majority of teachers who are White, middle class, monolingual and students of color, English-language learners, and poor students (Watson, 2012). These differences create cultural gaps between White teachers and Black students resulting in low achievement (Watson, 2012).

Hollins and Guzman (as cited in Watson, 2012) found that when White teachers have limited experiences with people of other races and cultures their understanding of racial diversity is negatively impacted (Watson, 2012). In their study, Hollins and Guzman found that White teachers viewed racial diversity as deficiency which contributed to a negative attitude towards teaching students of color (Watson, 2012). A cultural disconnect between teachers and students often occurs in suburban settings,

where the staff does not reflect the diversity of the student body. “Cultural mismatches exemplified by shifts in the racial makeup of student bodies and teaching staff and characterized by teachers’ being unfamiliar with and/or ill-equipped to respond adequately to diverse student cultures, backgrounds, norms, and belief systems personify a dilemma of approach and response in the teacher-student relationship” (Sudderth, 2009, p. 42). McAllister and Irvine (as cited in Sudderth, 2009) found that empathy and demonstrating a genuine interest through natural and purposeful interactions had a definitively positive impact on minority student populations and especially African American students’ perceptions of themselves in the academic environment (Sudderth, 2009).

Chapter Summary

Ninth grade has been described as the “make or break” year in terms of secondary school success or failure (Fulk, 2003, p. 9). Students who fail their classes are likely to question their ability to meet graduation requirements, lose interest in school, and consequently drop out of high school (Fulk, 2003). Statistics show that African American males are more likely than any other racial group to be retained in ninth grade (Jenkins, 2010). According to a report by the Schott Foundation for Public Education (2004), “In most school districts, up to 70 percent of Black boys who enter 9th grade do not graduate four years later with their peers” (Brown et al., 2013, p. 70). Due to cultural mismatches that exist between ninth grade teachers and African American male students and these students’ perceptions of discrimination, ninth grade becomes a barrier to academic success and subsequently, the completion of high school. The issue of African American

male academic achievement and the examination of the barriers to their achievement and the factors that contribute to their success is a timely issue worthy of investigation.

Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

Introduction

The transition from middle school to high school is described as a major roadblock to high school graduation for African American males (Jenkins, 2010). Recent statistics suggest that “One of every three-eighth [sic] grade students in the United States does not graduate from high school, and half of Black and Latino students do not make it to graduation day” (Brown, Dedmond, & Lafauci, 2006, p. 1). Retention studies reveal that students who are retained in ninth grade have a higher probability of dropping out of school (Blackwell, 2008). The limitation of the studies is that it is unknown if this probability of dropping out of high school is greater in suburban settings where African Americans make up a smaller percentage of the student population.

In recent years, suburban areas have undergone major demographic changes. Between 1990 and 2010, the nation’s suburbs have become increasingly diverse, housing more than half of all racial and ethnic groups, with an increasing percentage of low-income and linguistic minority families (Holme, Diem, & Welton, 2013).

“Approximately one third of all African Americans live in suburban communities, and their children are attending suburban schools” (Gordon, 2012, p. 1). As suburban demographics continue to experience rapid changes, suburban school systems have a responsibility of being able to educate students of color. However, research suggests that students of color are entering suburban schools that are ill equipped to address the academic and social needs of these students (Evans, 2007). Teacher efficacy and a lack

of cultural awareness are cited as barriers to the academic success of students in ninth grade.

Case studies in large urban districts suggest that teachers who are assigned to teach ninth grade are more likely than teachers in the upper grades to be uncertified, new to the profession, new to the school, or sometimes all three (Neild, 2009). Studies in urban districts have also found that new, inexperienced teachers are less likely than their senior colleagues to have classroom management skills, mastery of instructional strategies for ninth graders who need to catch up on academic skills, and access to the various material resources of the school (Neild, 2009). Research findings have indicated that there is a strong correlation between teacher efficacy and student achievement. Studies show that teachers with a low sense of efficacy negatively affect students with low self-esteem and motivation. Students of teachers with a low sense of efficacy suffer losses in perceived self-efficacy and performance expectations in the transition from elementary to junior high school. This is especially true for students who have a low opinion of their academic capabilities (Robinson, 2004). Some inexperienced teachers may also demonstrate a lack of cultural responsiveness towards African American students, which could influence the students' level of academic success.

A teacher's level of cultural responsiveness is also an important factor in the academic achievement of African American students. If students, especially students of color, perceive their teachers as being culturally insensitive, their level of achievement is greatly impacted. Research by Casteel (as cited in Sudderth, 2009) indicated that, "African American high school students complained more frequently that White teachers did not relate well to them" (Sudderth, 2009, p. 11). Research suggests that there are vast

differences between the majority of teachers who are White, middle class, monolingual and students of color, English-language learners, and poor students (Holme et al., 2013). These differences create cultural gaps between White teachers and Black students resulting in low achievement (Holme et al., 2013).

Low teacher efficacy and a lack of cultural responsiveness have been cited as barriers to the academic achievement of African American males in urban environments. However, little emphasis has been placed on these factors in suburban settings where shifts in the demographics demonstrate a greater need for schools to be culturally responsive to their students of color. In addition, there have been limited studies on the factors that contribute to the academic success of African American males. Research suggests that African American youth, who experience academic success despite adversity, represent an important segment of the K-12 population (Holme et al., 2013). Students who experience academic success in spite of adverse conditions are often referred to as educationally resilient (Holme et al., 2013). There is a small yet emerging body of research focused on the resiliency of African American youth in urban school environments, with limited attention given to the resiliency of African American males in suburban schools. The transitional year to high school is a challenging year for all students; however, African American males are experiencing a significantly greater level of difficulty than any other ethnic group and consequently, are not graduating from high school (Jenkins, 2010). Because this year is critical to high school completion, this qualitative research study will examine the ninth grade experience of African American males in suburban public high schools.

In order to study the effects and quality of the ninth grade experience of African American males, specifically in suburban, public high schools, this study responded to the following research questions:

1. What factors do African American males, who complete ninth grade in a suburban high school, identify as contributing to their success?
 - 1a. What strategies do African American males report as using to overcome barriers they identify?
 - 1b. To what extent do those students, who have succeeded in completing ninth grade in a suburban high school, refer to teacher efficacy as contributing to their success?
 - 1c. To what extent do those students, who have succeeded in completing ninth grade in a suburban high school, refer to the existence of cultural responsiveness in their schools as contributing to their success?
 - 1d. To what extent do African American male students, who have succeeded in ninth grade in suburban high schools, attribute their success as a consequence of attending a suburban high school?
2. What factors do African American males, who fail to complete ninth grade in a suburban high school, identify as contributing to their failure?
 - 2a. What strategies do African American males, who fail to complete ninth grade in a suburban high school, report that they attempted to use to help them succeed?

2b. To what extent do those students, who failed to complete ninth grade in a suburban high school, identify teacher efficacy as a hindrance to their success?

2c. To what extent do those students, who failed to complete ninth grade in a suburban high school, refer to the lack of cultural responsiveness in their schools as a hindrance to their success?

2d .To what extent do African American male students, who failed to complete ninth grade in a suburban high school, attribute their failure as a consequence of attending a suburban high school?

The research questions guided the interviews used for this study, which allowed the participants to tell their individual stories about the barriers they faced during this critical year. In addition to the research questions, open-ended questions were used so as not to lead participant responses. Critical race theory, the theoretical framework for this study, utilizes storytelling as a tool for analysis (Dixson and Rousseau, 2006). Therefore, by using narrative and interviews as the main strategy of data collection, the researcher was provided with a rich and in-depth understanding of the ninth grade experience of African American males in a suburban high school.

Research Context

The research was conducted at a high school located in a suburban community 30 miles north of New York City. The school's total enrollment is 1,287 students and consists of a diverse student and staff population. Student demographics consist of 44% Hispanic, 36% White, 15% African American, and 4% Asian. According to 2010 Census data, the median household income in this community was \$51,244; however, 7% of this

town's residents live in poverty. Twenty-two percent of the school population were eligible for free lunch and 8% were eligible for reduced lunch during the 2010-2011 school year. The school boasts many academic achievements and accolades. For example, in the 2013-2014 school year, 79% of the 12th grade class graduated. Out of the 79% graduation rate, 92% were White students, 76% were African American, and 68% were Latino (retrieved from <http://data.nysed.gov/gradrate>). The school also has successful music, athletic, and arts programs.

The student and staff demographics are significant to note and will serve as the context for this research study. Over the past ten years, there has been a significant shift within the school and community demographics. With an increase in the African American and Hispanic student population, the school has been charged with the task of meeting the social and academic needs of an increasingly diverse student population. Within this diverse school, some African American male students struggle with making a successful transition from middle school to high school, and consequently, fail ninth grade. Some of the aforementioned barriers to their success (e.g., low teacher efficacy and a lack of cultural responsiveness) could be factors that contribute to their failure; however, their personal stories will help inform the research and shed light on their specific ninth-grade experiences within this suburban setting. The researcher's goal in this study was to learn from African American male high school students about their ninth-grade experiences and the factors they identify as facilitating their academic success and/or failure.

Research Participants

The study participants consisted of six students selected from a purposeful sample: three African American males who successfully completed ninth grade and are currently enrolled as 10th and 12th grade students; and three African American males who have been retained in ninth grade. The participants were purposively selected by the school's guidance and administrative staff based on the following criteria: the number of credits students earned at the end of ninth grade and final course grades. All of the participants were assured of confidentiality and no data was reported that would allow anyone to determine the identity of any participant. Each student participated with parental consent and read and signed an informed consent document prior to the interview (Appendix A). Each participant is referred to as Participant A, Participant B, etc.

Instruments to be Used in Data Collection

Interviews served as the sole instrument for data collection in this study. Utilizing this form of data collection enabled the researcher to understand the ninth-grade experience from the participants' points of view (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). In addition, this form of data collection called for the interviewer to encourage the participants to describe their feelings, behavior, and experiences as accurately as possible (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). The researcher evaluated the responses of the participants' shared experiences in order to arrive at concrete meaning (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009) and recurring themes. The interviews were semi-structured for the purpose of obtaining rich descriptions of the "life world view of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena" (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, p. 3). The interviews were

conducted at the research site in an assigned location. Each interview was conducted face-to-face by the researcher and was recorded with a digital audio device. The interviews were later transcribed verbatim. The interview sessions required participants to provide written responses to questions prior to the interview. The student responses were used as a springboard for the session discussions. Each participant was made aware of the overall topic of the interview, as well as the time commitment required prior to agreeing to the interview itself (Appendix A). The interview sessions had a duration time of 40-60 minutes with guided questions. A follow-up interview with one of the participants was conducted to clarify responses. The aforementioned research questions served as a map for the interview sessions to guide the participants' conversation. By utilizing open-ended questions, the goal was to collect data in such a way that best captures the perceptions, concerns, and overall ninth grade experiences of the participants. It provided a conversation in which the topic could be explored. As a result, it required the use of open-ended questions with considerate attention given to follow-up questions that both highlighted the participants' experiences and clarified the meaning of their responses (Brinkman & Kvale, 2009).

In order to ensure the quality and usefulness of the data, an interview protocol was developed. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) describe the interview process as “an attempt to come at the research question ‘sideways’” (p. 58). While the research questions guided the interviews, they could not serve as the actual interview questions. The interview protocol (Appendix B) provided a map by which the research questions were introduced and addressed in a manner that the participants could understand.

Data Analysis

The qualitative study was completed over a period of seven weeks. During this timeframe, the researcher met with each participant twice at the research site. The first meeting provided the researcher with an opportunity to get acquainted with the participants and get a sense of their general beliefs about school and their academic experiences. The researcher did not record these meetings, but took brief notes. During the second week, the researcher conducted the one-on-one interviews with the participants who successfully completed ninth grade. Students were asked to complete a brief questionnaire prior to the recorded interview sessions to help the researcher gather some preliminary information about the participants (Appendix C). The questionnaire consisted of questions regarding the participants' family backgrounds, personal interests, and future goals. During the third week, the researcher interviewed the students who failed ninth grade. These students also completed a brief questionnaire prior to the recorded sessions. The fourth week was used to conduct follow-up interviews with one of the participants to clarify responses. During the last three weeks (of the seven-week period), the researcher submitted the recorded interviews to a transcription service to be transcribed. After receiving the interview transcripts, the researcher coded the interviews.

The general process of data analysis in this qualitative research study involved preparing and organizing data for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding, and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion (Creswell, 2013). In order to organize and prepare the data collected, the researcher listened to the recordings of each interview shortly after the sessions were conducted and took extensive notes, highlighting different emotions and language conveyed. This

provided the researcher with an opportunity to conduct meaningful reflection and interpretation of the data early during the data analysis process.

The next step of analysis consisted of a careful reading of the interview transcripts and a system of coding. The researcher identified significant phrases, emerging themes and correlations between participant responses. Significant quotes from the transcripts were highlighted and used to support evidence or trends postulated in the literature review. Upon completion of this stage of analysis, the researcher coded the data according to identified themes. Themes were organized by topic area (i.e., teacher efficacy, cultural responsiveness, and emerging themes). Once the themes were identified, the researcher sought to discover how they connected. The frequency of the themes and phrases was noted. The interview transcripts were reread and checked against the coded data to ensure that the interpretation was consistent with the preponderance of data and that those conclusions were not overreaching (Holme et al., 2013).

Summary

Ninth grade has been described as the “make or break” year in terms of secondary school success or failure (Fulk, 2003, p. 9). Statistics show that African American males are more likely than any other racial group to be retained in ninth grade (Jenkins, 2010). According to a report by the Schott Foundation for Public Education (2004), “In most school districts, up to 70 percent of Black boys who enter 9th grade do not graduate four years later with their peers” (Brown et al., 2013, p.70). This qualitative research study collected and analyzed data that provided a clear understanding of the barriers to the academic achievement of African American males and the factors that they identified as contributing to their success or failure during the critical year of ninth grade, specifically

in a suburban public high school. The study utilized the qualitative research method of interviews, which allowed the researcher to “understand the world from the subjects’ points of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences,” and “to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations” (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009).

Chapter 4: Results

Research Questions

This study examined the perspective of African American male high school students and the factors that they identified as contributing to their success or failure in ninth grade in a public suburban high school. The research focused on the motivating factors and challenges that the participants identified as the major influences that impacted their success or failure in ninth grade. In order to study in-depth perceptions of the students, interviews were selected as the sole instrument for data collection. The interviews were semi-structured in nature with open-ended questions, which allowed participants to guide the direction of the conversations. This format also allowed participants to reflect on their ninth-grade experiences and their beliefs about their academic success and/or failures. The intention of this study was to discover the academic, social, and environmental challenges that students faced during their ninth-grade year that they reported as either hindering or contributing to their success.

Ten students from a suburban high school were purposively selected to participate in this study: five students who successfully passed ninth grade; and five students who failed and were subsequently retained in ninth grade. The participants were selected from a purposeful sample by the school's guidance and administrative staff based on the following criteria: the number of credits students earned at the end of ninth grade and final course grades. Out of the five students who passed ninth grade, only four participants were identified who met the criteria for passing ninth grade. One of the five

students selected to participate in the study, did not receive parental consent to participate. Out of the five students who failed ninth grade, only three participants were identified who met the criteria for failing ninth grade and being retained. Two of the five students identified to participate in the study failed to meet the criteria for failing ninth grade and being retained due to the fact that these students only failed a few of their ninth-grade classes, and had earned enough credits (by the time of the study) to be considered 10th graders.

The students that participated in the study attended a suburban high school located outside of New York City with a predominantly White and Hispanic student population. Six African American male participants, three who successfully passed ninth grade and three who failed ninth grade, were purposively selected. Each student participated in a semi-structured interview with a duration of 40 minutes to an hour. Due to the open-ended nature of the interview questions, participant responses guided the direction of the conversations. This in turn, allowed the researcher to use follow-up questions in a second interview with one of the participants. The follow-up questions served to capture the fullness of the student's perspectives, as well as to confirm the meaning of the participant's responses. Each interview was recorded using a digital recorder, and then transcribed by a transcription service.

Chapter 4 presents the findings that emerged from the interviews. The chapter is organized by the research questions and the major themes that were identified by the participants. The researcher used two distinct groups of questions for the two distinct groups of participants. The following research questions guided the study and were posed to the participants that successfully passed ninth grade:

1. What factors do African American males, who complete ninth grade in a suburban high school, identify as contributing to their success?
 - 1a. What strategies do African American males report as using to overcome barriers they identify?
 - 1b. To what extent do those students, who have succeeded in completing ninth grade in a suburban high school, refer to teacher efficacy as contributing to their success?
 - 1c. To what extent do those students who have succeeded in completing ninth grade in a suburban high school refer to the existence of cultural responsiveness in their schools as contributing to their success?
 - 1d. To what extent do African American male students, who have succeeded in ninth grade in suburban high schools, attribute their success as a consequence of attending a suburban high school?

The following questions guided the study and were posed to the students who failed ninth grade:

2. What factors do African American males, who fail to complete ninth grade in a suburban high school, identify as contributing to their failure?
 - 2a. What strategies do African American males who fail to complete ninth grade in a suburban high school report that they attempted to use to help them succeed?
 - 2b. To what extent do those students who failed to complete ninth grade in a suburban high school identify teacher efficacy as a hindrance to their success?

2c. To what extent do those students who failed to complete ninth grade in a suburban high school refer to the lack of cultural responsiveness in their schools as a hindrance to their success?

2d. To what extent do African American male students who failed to complete ninth grade in a suburban high school attribute their failure as a consequence of attending a suburban high school?

Excerpts from the interviews will be used to accurately capture the voice of the participants, and provide evidence of the major themes that surfaced during the interviews.

Research Participants

There were two distinct groups of participants interviewed for the study. The first group of participants (Participants A-C), consisted of students who successfully completed ninth grade. They are currently 10th and 12th graders. The second group of participants (Participants D-F), consisted of students who failed ninth grade. These students are currently retained ninth graders. Descriptions of each of the participants are provided in the sections below.

Successful completer of ninth grade. Participant A. Participant A is an 18-year-old African American male. He is a 12th grader. Although his parents never married, both of his parents are actively involved in his life. He resides with his mother. Both of the participant's parents are correctional officers. Neither parent finished high school or attended college; however, they did earn their GED. Participant A is a hard-working student. He has achieved both academic and athletic success. He credits basketball for helping him learn discipline at an early age and maintain academic focus. He explained,

“My dad pushed sports on me so I took a liking to basketball real early and I continued that and just used it as a tool to help with everything else. I wanted to play basketball but I knew my books came first. So mom wouldn’t let me play ball if I wasn’t doing good in school, so that just helped motivate me more to actually do good in school.” In addition to playing on the school basketball team, Participant A hosts the school’s radio talk show two days per week. It’s a sports talk show in which he reports on his school’s athletic competitions as well as professional sports. The student reported that his involvement with the talk show has inspired him to pursue a post-secondary career in journalism.

Successful completer of ninth grade. Participant B. Participant B is a 15-year-old African American male. He is a 10th grader. He resides with his mother and father. His mother works for a school in New York City. The participant was uncertain about his mother’s specific job title, but said that she “works with the school lunches and helps schools decide which choice is healthy and stuff like that.” His dad has a civil service job. Participant B is a student who has achieved academic success. He explained, “I was getting like 90’s and 100’s (in my classes) and the thing was that like I didn’t really have to spend a lot of time studying, like I just went after school to the teacher and she helped me out.” During his freshman year, Participant B tried out for the Junior Varsity Soccer Team but didn’t make it; however, he enjoys playing soccer independently outside of school. Participant B has attended the middle school and high school in this school district; however, he was born in Tanzania. During the interview, Participant B described the differences between being educated in New York versus the education he received in Africa. He explained, “When I came here in fifth grade...I felt like I got downgraded like from what I was learning like in my history class (in Tanzania).” Participant B

describes himself as being self-motivated and looks forward to pursuing a future career in film.

Successful completer of ninth grade. Participant C. Participant C is a 15-year-old African American male. He is in 10th grade. His mother is a nurse and his dad is a construction worker. Although both parents are actively involved in his life, he is being raised by his mother. Participant C has achieved both academic and athletic success. During his 9th grade year, he was the only freshman to be allowed to play varsity football because of his great athletic ability. In addition, Participant C plays on the junior varsity basketball team and is a member of the track team. Although he credits sports as keeping him academically motivated, he credits his mother for helping him stay on track. He explained, “My mom motivates me to get good grades. She just tells me that like you really can’t do anything without an education. Whatever you want to do in life you really can’t do without an education, so I just go to school and do what I have to do.” Participant C has aspirations to attend college and eventually play professional basketball or football. He also wants to pursue a career in interior design.

Failed ninth grade-retained participants. Participant D. Participant D is 15-year-old African American male. He was retained in ninth grade, but has spent his 10th grade year recovering credits lost during freshman year and earning enough credits to be considered an 11th grader at the end of the school year. His mother is a school bus driver and is the custodial parent that he lives with. He did not share much information about his father. Participant D reflected on his ninth-grade year with some difficulty and anguish. He shared that freshman year was “full of struggles” and bad decision-making. He wanted to play on the school basketball team, but couldn’t due to his failing grades.

Although his grades disqualified him to play sports in school, he was part of a community basketball team. His postsecondary plans consist of going to college and eventually playing professional basketball.

Failed ninth grade-retained participants. Participant E. Participant E is a 16-year-old African American male. He was retained in ninth grade, but has spent his 10th grade year recovering credits lost during freshman year and earning enough credits to be considered an 11th grader at the end of the school year. His mother is a teaching assistant at a high school. His father works for the local train company. Both of his parents reside within the home. Like Participant D, Participant E reflected on his ninth-grade year with some difficulty and regret. He shared that his freshman year was filled with “bad memories.” He shared, “I didn’t want to wake up in the morning for school or whatever, and then I just kept getting in trouble.” Although he was academically ineligible to play sports during his freshman year, he had an opportunity to play both football and basketball during his second year of high school, but his season was cut short due to an injury. His postsecondary plans consist of going to a division 1 college and playing football. He also shared that he would one day like to be a sports commentator.

Failed ninth grade-retained participants. Participant F. Participant F is a 15-year-old African American male. He is a retained ninth grader who is currently working to recover credits lost during freshman year in order to earn enough credits to be considered an 11th grader by the end of the school year. He lives with both his mother and father. His dad works for a shipping company and his mom works for a computer software company. He reflected on his ninth-grade year as being a time of “laughing, joking, and running around.” Although he did not play any sports during his ninth-grade

year, he was involved in Project Storm (a pseudonym for the actual club name), an extracurricular club geared towards African American male students. His postsecondary plans consist of going to college to one day become a detective.

Data Analysis and Findings

Several themes emerged from the data and were commonly reported by the students who successfully completed ninth grade. The themes revolved around the students' reporting about their successful positive teacher/student relationships, their involvement in extracurricular activities, and being self-motivated. The themes that emerged from the interviews with the students who failed ninth grade revolved around their reporting of a lack of support during their transition from middle school to high school, having uncaring teachers, feeling invisible in their classes, and their involvement in sports. In addition, there were six major themes that emerged from the data and were commonly reported by all of the participants. Themes reported by participants are presented and included in the discussion and analysis of responses to the relevant question.

Research Question 1. What factors do African American males, who complete ninth grade in a suburban high school, identify as contributing to their success? There were three major themes that surfaced during the interviews when considering factors that the students, who successfully passed ninth grade, identified as contributing to their success: positive teacher/student relationships; involvement in extracurricular activities; and self-motivation. These themes are illustrated in Figure 4.1. The figure displays the major themes that emerged from the students' responses to the first research question.

Participants	Positive Teacher/Student Relationships	Involvement in Extracurricular Activities	Self-Motivation
Participant A	X	X	X
Participant B	X	X	X
Participant C		X	X

Figure 4.1. The figure illustrates the three major themes that were reported by the students that successfully completed ninth grade.

Positive teacher/student relationships. During the course of the interviews, the participants that successfully completed ninth grade described the positive relationships they had with specific teachers, which they believe contributed to their success during ninth grade. Two out of the three participants attributed their success to having a teacher that they perceived genuinely cared about their achievement. Their recollection of these experiences was communicated in a positive light, indicating that the success they achieved during this critical year was an impetus to the success they are experiencing now as 10th and 12th graders.

Participant A attributed most of his success to having the support of a teacher who he perceived genuinely cared about his success. Participant A recalled:

“She was my Creative Writing teacher. I wasn’t expecting much from the class. I thought it was another elective and I didn’t know her before going to class...She critiqued my writing a lot which made me a better writer, you know. And I have wrote a lot of personal stories about things going on with my family and my mother before I was even born, you know...I never felt comfortable telling anybody else about these situations, but I told it to the whole class. I read the story out loud, you know. I felt comfortable with her that it was like I didn’t care about what anybody else thought as long as she connected with it...You know she

always checks on how I'm doing in my classes and if I'm going to my classes and all of that stuff. She's definitely somebody that I definitely could depend on for a lot of things, even when I leave high school I know that she's somebody that I have that can help me."

Participant B shared a similar experience with his math teacher. He explained:

"Freshman year, it was a great time because like all my classes were very easy, like I passed all my classes, even like the most hated class. I loved that class because of the teacher. I loved my math class because the teacher like would explain something and it would just be amazing because like I actually understood it. That was like the first time I actually understood a math teacher in like all my school career...I can actually like talk to her and stuff. Like in the first quarter, I was struggling with my math class and I went to her and I was telling her like I'm struggling with my math class, like I don't know what to do and stuff, and she's like oh I can like help you out. You can come and I could see what I could do for you."

Involvement in extracurricular activities. The participants that successfully completed ninth grade also attributed their success to their involvement in sports and extracurricular activities. Two of the three participants are student athletes, and credited their involvement on a team as being a motivating factor for their success.

Participant A shared that his love of sports was nurtured at a very young age and that he learned early on the possibilities and advantages that sports could provide. He shared:

“I played my first organized game when I was four years old and I’ve been playing ever since. So it exposed me to understanding the college process at a young age, you know, understanding that how scholarships work and how coaches recruit you and how a lot of things exposed me to knowing about what you need to do to get into college. Because whether basketball is going to take me there or not I needed to know the minimum requirements at least to help me get to a decent school and a school that was my choice.”

In addition, Participant A shared that basketball was a safe haven from many social ills and that it separated him from other young males his age. He disclosed:

“I think that’s the one thing that separated me from a lot of my friends who unfortunately now are going through certain situations where they didn’t have that to fall back on. They didn’t have sports. They didn’t have the structure, even though both of my parents weren’t together, they made sure that structure was always there. So I think that kept me sane. It was my sanctuary you know. It was really like a safe haven for me, you know, like it kept me safe from a lot of things.”

Participant C, who was given the opportunity to play varsity football in ninth grade, credits sports as being the reason why he is able to maintain academic focus. He explained:

“Focus is like the most cause in sports you have to focus a lot and so that kind of helps me in the classroom when I need to focus. Cause like in a game, a close game, like a basketball game, a close basketball game, the coach will tell you to focus so that you could win. Like you got to focus, you got to play defense, have

to make sure you're sharp, everything is sharp. So that helps to focus in the classroom mostly. (Sports) also helps you stay on track and I played sports all throughout the years so my grades have to be good all throughout the years in order for me to play and that's what I want to do."

Self-motivation. During the course of the interviews, the students reported that they attributed a part of their success to being self-motivated. They believed that they were able to attain a certain level of success with minimal teacher assistance and/or direction. The students utilized this internal strategy throughout academically difficult times. Participant A explained that his self-motivation resulted from his prior negative experiences with uncaring teachers. His negative encounters helped him draw from within and persevere through challenging experiences. He shared:

"Even now at this point you know, I'm in certain classes where I kind of understand but like last year and sophomore year I would definitely sit there and I'd be like I don't understand it. I'll probably write it down and go back to it later and say I'll figure it out myself but I never went to the teacher...It's definitely odd because even my mom says like why don't you ask for help, like I don't know how. Like she even with the whole college process, she's like go to your guidance counselor. I said no. I'll figure it out. I'll do it. I'll apply for the scholarships. I'll apply for this one and do this, that, and the third. And I did it."

Similarly, Participants B and C also reported being self-motivated and being able to experience academic success with very little direction from their teachers. Participant B reported:

“I mean I didn’t really have to go to a teacher and tell them because like I knew what to do. Like I didn’t need anyone’s help. Not trying to sound like a little bit harsh, but like I knew like what to do so I was going to do it and that’s what I did.”

Participant C shared that he didn’t experience many struggles in ninth grade due to his natural abilities. He reported, “I really don’t study that much. Most of the time it just comes to me and when it comes to the test, I just do good.”

It was apparent from the interviews that the students who successfully completed ninth grade were able to motivate themselves without the extrinsic motivation of a teacher. They also reported that their intrinsic motivation helped them compensate for their lack of content knowledge in some subject areas. In contrast to the students who failed ninth grade, the successful completers were able to draw from within during challenging academic times and find the strength to endure.

Research Question 2. What factors do African American males, who fail to complete ninth grade in a suburban high school, identify as contributing to their failure? There were three major themes that surfaced during the interviews when considering factors that the students, who failed to complete ninth grade, identified as contributing to their failure: lack of transitional support, uncaring teachers, and feeling invisible. These themes are listed in Figure 4.2. The figure illustrates the themes that emerged from the students’ responses to the second research question.

Participants	Lack of Transitional Support	Uncaring Teachers	Feeling Invisible	Involvement In Sports
Participant D				X
Participant E	X	X		X
Participant F		X	X	

Figure 4.2. The figure illustrates the four major themes that were reported by the respondents who failed ninth grade.

Uncaring teachers. Contrary to the participants that successfully completed ninth grade, the participants that failed spoke of having uncaring teachers during their ninth grade year. They also shared stories of feeling disconnected from their teachers and the impact this had on their academic success.

Participant F, a retained ninth grader, spoke about not having a connection with any of his teachers. He explained, “I just don’t really like any of my teachers. I mean I like my math teacher. She’s fun to be around, but I mean I wouldn’t talk to her the way I talk to Ms. C (his guidance counselor). I mean freshman year I didn’t really make that many connections except that one teacher and like I know she’s like the school person...Most of the teachers that I know and that I’ve had don’t really care.”

Participant E didn’t believe any of his teachers cared about his success. Contrastingly, he believed his football coaches cared more than his teachers. When the researcher asked Participant E to elaborate on the relationship differences between his teachers and coaches and what he attributes the differences to, he explained, “My coaches actually want to help me.” The researcher probed further and asked Participant E if he believed his teachers cared about him. He responded, “They don’t because I’m Black.” He went on to explain that he had never had any Black teachers since he’s been in high

school. He explained, “I have never had a Black teacher since I came to (this high school).” The researcher asked Participant E if his relationships with his teachers would be different if they were Black. He responded, “Yes, because they’ll know what I like to do with basketball and whatever. They can relate to that. I guarantee if they were Black they would talk about basketball or whatever, like they’ll bring up like Michael Jordan or whatever.”

Lack of transitional support. Participant E, a retained student, spoke about the noticeable transitional differences he experienced going from middle school to high school, and attributed his failure to this lack of support. He recalled:

“When I was in 8th grade I was actually believe it or not, a good kid. I had, what were my grades? Like 85’s and higher. Now they’re not even like that in high school cause people was right. High school is different from the middle school. The teachers there (at his previous school) actually help you. Like I don’t know how to explain it. Like they help you here but they don’t. They’re like more on your case down at (his previous school), like they want you to do good. They want you to get out of high school. They’ll help you like once here and then they’ll just be like I don’t know what to do anymore.”

Feeling invisible. Participant F, a retained student, spoke about feeling invisible in most of his classes due to the fact that he was the only African American student in the class, which subsequently affected his performance. He shared, “I don’t like my English teacher. He just like doesn’t pay attention to me. He wouldn’t, he just doesn’t. I don’t like the way he teaches. He just doesn’t pay attention. I wish I switched out. I mean in most of my classes I’m the only African American kid so in that class I don’t talk at all.” He went

on to explain that in classes where he was the only African American student, that he wouldn't participate. He explained, "Yeah I would do the work but then I just wouldn't talk. I just listened to what they were saying and then copy down the answer when they said it."

Involvement in sports. Contrary to the participants that successfully passed ninth grade, the participants that were retained were unable to play sports due to their ineligibility. However, they still credited sports as a source of motivation to improve their grades. Participants D and E spoke about their involvement with the school basketball and football team, and the fact that their season was cut short due to their ineligibility as a result of failing grades. Participant E credits his desire to play on the school basketball team as being a motivating factor to improve his grades. He shared, "Cause I got basketball so I'm not really worried about my teachers like I was last year. I'm not really worried about it. All I know is I just got to show up to class and do the work and then I can play basketball."

Common themes reported by all respondents. Throughout the interviews, all of the participants, both the students who successfully completed ninth grade and the students that failed, spent a substantial amount of time sharing negative experiences they've encountered with teachers who they perceived as not caring about their success. From the interviews, it became evident that the majority of the participants (from both groups) believed that the degree to which teachers cared about their success affected the degree to which students cared about their achievement. It was also evident from the participants' responses that it was very important for them to personally connect with their teachers. Their ability to identify with their teachers on some level served as a

motivating factor for the students. Three of the six participants shared personal stories in which they discovered they had similar backgrounds and childhood experiences with faculty members. The common themes are illustrated in Figure 4.3. The figure illustrates the common themes that emerged during the interviews with all of the participants.

Participants	Personally Identifying with Teachers	Level of Teacher Care	Parental Involvement	Involvement in Extracurricular	School Culture
Participant A	X	X	X	X	X
Participant B	X	X	X	X	X
Participant C		X	X	X	X
Participant D	X	X	X	X	
Participant E		X	X	X	
Participant F	X				

Figure 4.3. The figure illustrates the common themes reported by all participants.

Personally identifying with teachers. The participants that connected with their teachers due to similar childhood experiences or ethnicities positively reflected on these connections which indicated that the students viewed identifying with their teachers as a meaningful experience. Participant D spoke about connecting with his science teacher due to their similar childhood struggles. He shared:

“I had a good relationship with my science teacher. I would always like whenever I needed something, I would always go to her and talk to her about it because we went through the same thing. Like struggles in life. Like me and her have been going through the same path when she was younger. I can also go to my forensics teacher. I can go to him with anything cause I know he’ll keep it to himself. He gives good advice and if he’s been through something similar like he’ll give me the advice on what he did to overcome it or whatever for me to do the same.”

Participant F shared a similar experience of being able to connect with his ninth grade guidance counselor due to their similar childhoods. He shared, “Like the way she talks to me I feel like she’s been messed up too as a kid. Like she does the same things. She’s done things that I’ve done as a kid and like messed up for it too, and she’s understanding.”

Participant B spoke about connecting with a teacher who he shares a similar ethnic background. He explained, “I can connect with my French teacher because like, well, because he’s like African just like me, so like when I talk to him about something, he’s like more understandable. It’s like that thing when you meet someone from the same race; it’s kind of like you just connect like that. He told me he’s from Senegal, so I’m like I’m from Tanzania, like I was born there. Yeah I was like, like yeah, we connected.”

Level of teacher care. All of the student participants, both the students who successfully passed ninth grade and those who failed, shared the common belief that the degree to which teachers cared about their students’ success is the degree to which they cared about their own achievement. Participant C stated, “Like if the teacher doesn’t care it’s just like nobody really cares about the class.” Participant E believed that the teachers who share the same ethnicity of their students demonstrate care for these students. He stated, “Like the Spanish teachers or whatever they care for like these little Mexican kids or whatever. They care for them, but like the rest of these teachers, nah.” Participant F stated, “I feel like they just wouldn’t care.” Participant F also stated that he tends to perform better academically in a class if he likes the teacher. He stated, “I do better with most teachers. If I like the teacher then I’ll do better for some reason. It depends on the teacher, but more of them I feel like they just wouldn’t care. They would just do what

they have to do as a teacher and then when the day is over, they just forget about you. They don't care." Participant D believed that there are some teachers that actually care about their students, but that some of them are only there to do a job. He explained, "Some teachers come here to teach not to share their stories, but there are some teachers that come here to do both, like they want to encourage you, to help you out, and teach at the same time. Some teachers just come here to get that paycheck at the end of the week."

Parental involvement. Another theme that the student participants commonly reported was the theme of parental involvement. All of the student participants (even those who failed) attributed their academic success to having a supportive parent. As was noted previously, most of the student participants are being raised by single mothers. All of the students shared that they had a supportive mother who cared about their success.

Participant A spoke candidly about his family background. He shared that neither of his parents had a college education nor did they graduate from high school, although they did earn their GED. Although his parents were unable to provide him with the academic guidance and influence to be successful in school, he credits his parents, especially his mother for their support. He shared:

"Understanding how to study was something that I had to learn by myself, you know, because my mom and dad have GED's. They both, you know what I mean, didn't graduate. You know, it wasn't like they didn't have a lot of education. It was just certain circumstances that stopped them from attaining their actual diploma. But they made sure that I wasn't going to turn out like they did. They made sure that I was going to stay on the right path and so I had my mom pushing me. She stayed on top of me of course with my grades."

Participant B also credits his mother for helping him stay on track. He explained, “Like my mom you know, she’s very big on that and she’s like you can’t be playing video games on week days because like that’s the time you’ve got to take to study and stuff, so I was like ok.”

Participant C shared, “My mom motivates me to get good grades most of the time. My dad supports me, but he’s not on me as much as my mom.”

Participant D explained how he spoke to his mother when he began having academic difficulties. He shared, “My mom talked to me and she told me to get back on track. To do what I can to get my grades higher, at least to a 75.”

Participant E revealed that his mother works as a teaching assistant in a nearby high school, which provides her the ability to maintain consistent contact with his teachers. When the researcher asked Participant E how he felt about this, he replied, “It’s terrible. She goes right to the teachers.” Participant F credited his mom’s job as a secretary for helping him to stay on track. He explained, “My mom is a secretary, so it’s easier for her to just go online while she’s working, which is so annoying. Like one time I cut class before and like she checked and she called me and said, ‘J why weren’t you in class?’ and I was like, how do you know that? She’s like, ‘cause I just checked’ and I was like oh, dang it.” Despite the degree of academic success the participants achieved, they all believed that their parents were supportive of their efforts and genuinely cared about their success.

Involvement in extracurricular activities. All of the participants spoke about their involvement with Project Storm, a school club for African American males. They

spoke positively about the club and how it is geared towards empowering young African American males. Participant B shared:

“Project Storm is like a brotherhood like kind of thing. So basically it’s to try to help young Black men stay in school, work with the education, like do things to help us increase the Black males as like a whole, instead of like the percentage of graduation being low for Black males or like actually Black people in general, try to increase it. Instead of like keep us off the street and stuff we’ll stay in school, work harder and improve and show people that we are on the same level. We’re not just like below them.”

Participant C shared that he matured as a result of being a part of Project Storm. He stated, “I changed because of it. I think that I’m more responsible. I think I’m more rational. I think more about everything I do. “

Participant F shared that Project Storm is “where the Black kids in the community go and like they talk, just talk about their grades, what’s going on in the home and life around them and stuff.” All of the participants informed me that Project Storm is run by the school security guards, two African American men who are well-respected by the students. Participant C shared, “I look at them (the security guards who advise Project Storm) like they’re role models for us.”

It is evident from the students’ responses that their involvement in extracurricular activities, especially being part of a sports team, is an important part of their academic careers. It is the students’ perceptions that their affiliation with a team or club serves as a motivating factor for their academic achievement. Participant C stated, “Sports helped me in school because if it wasn’t for sports I don’t know what I would be doing, really...It

helps me stay focused, helps me get the good grades that I have because if I don't then I can't play." Participant E spoke about his attendance issues in ninth grade and how he realized that cutting classes would hinder him from playing basketball. He explained, "They (his attendance issues) was going to stop me from playing basketball next year, so I was like no I'm not. I need to play my basketball... That's why I don't cut no more."

School culture. To aid the researcher's understanding of the school's building culture, the participants were asked to describe the various racial and social groups in the school and how these groups coexist within the building, especially during lunchtime. All of the participants commonly reported on the diverse nature of the school and the manner in which various groups connect.

Participant A shared that the school was very diverse and consisted of many different social and racial groups. Despite the diverse nature of the student body, and the appearance of segregation in the school cafeteria, he believed that the student body gets along well. He explained:

"It's the cool kids versus everybody, you know. You know of course, the kids who played sports stuck together. It's really like the kids who really went to middle school together, lived here our whole lives, grew up and end up being the kids who are the A kids, you know, not to toot my own horn, not that there's anything wrong with who I am now, you know. And then minority groups really hang out together. The White kids hang out more together, and then you have café, you know, if you walk into the café right now it's really divided. I mean you can see it. Like the Spanish population sits towards the back and you can't even see them because there's a wall there, so you don't even know they're there which

is like, it's crazy. It's crazy if you really look at it. Then in the back is really a mix of kids who grew up together. And then it's like the White kids in the middle, and that's it. The Black kids are in the back and they stay over there in front of the café. It's not like a clique. It's just more like recognition and comfortability. Diversity is crazy here. It's really no racism here.”

Similar to Participant A, Participant B recognized the rich diversity of the school.

He explained:

“Well what I love about this school is that like a lot of people connect with a lot of people. It doesn't really matter their race but it still shows like if you walk into the cafeteria on your left side you see all like Latino's, like just Latino's on the this side and then over here in the central part you see only like White people and then in the back you see like a mix of like White people and like Italian and all them and like Latino's, and like Blacks just hanging out like at one table like in the central part and all the way the far right. I guess like everyone is really like diverse but still like as I just said like when you're with a race, when you're with someone with the same race, you just clique with them.”

Participant C gave a very similar description of the school cafeteria as Participants A and B. He described the environment in the following manner:

“You could sit anywhere cause mostly if you do sports like it's not like one section. It's all over the place. Like you got sports people sitting in one place and sports over there or all over the place. So it just depends like for me, I do sports. I don't sit in like one section, I sit all over. It's not separated like drama, and stuff like that. It's like basically people who are like you. Like it's basically set up like

with people like who you know longer. Like me, I will stay with the people like I grew up with and stuff like that.”

Participants D, E, and F did not describe the school in terms of its diversity. They spoke about students sitting in the cafeteria with other students that they connected with regardless of their social or racial background. Participant E stated, “I’ll go and talk to anybody.” Participant F reflected on his experiences at a previous school he attended in North Carolina and how racist the environment was in comparison to his current school. He recalled, “Like it was pretty rural, racist. There was like racism everywhere. Like they’ll call themselves, white people will be there and they’ll call themselves niggers and stuff, and like call you. Like the Black people there, they’re so used to people being racist that they let them like walk over them. So I seen that and I’m like what, I ain’t going to be like that, so I had to fight all the time you know.” It is evident from the participants’ responses that the school culture is one in which students feel safe and accepted.

Ideal characteristics of a good teacher. All of the participants were asked to describe their ideal characteristics of a good teacher. Reflecting on their own experiences, the participants gave similar responses that revolved around themes of care and trust. The themes are illustrated in Figure 4.4. The figure illustrates the themes that emerged from the students’ discussion on their ideal characteristics of a good teacher.

Participants	Genuine	Willing to Help	Gives Multiple Chances to Succeed	Never Gives Up on Students	Wants Students to be Successful
Participant A	X		X		
Participant B		X			X
Participant C			X		X
Participant D		X		X	X
Participant E				X	X
Participant F	X			X	X

Figure 4.4. The figure illustrates the respondents' interpretation of the ideal characteristics of a good teacher.

Participant A responded, "I don't know what it would be, I could tell she (the teacher he identified with) was genuine, you know. I mean that was one thing, that she wasn't phony. She was very genuine."

Participant B gave the following description of a good teacher (referring to one of his current teachers), "She's more like outgoing and willing because she's always looking to like give a helping hand. She always goes out of her way to try to make you do better and like most teachers will say they care about you. But if you don't care about your grades, then how do you expect them to help you out at the end." Participant B also spoke about teachers who have been in the profession for a long time and how the time factor may be an issue with the level of care they demonstrate towards students. He explained, "Some of the teachers have been doing this for like too long. They've been seeing the same people over and over again, like they probably lost the drive they had. Like there's teachers who are motivated to do this. Like they want kids to learn. They want the kids to be successful and they would even say like if I'm not working out for you, there's another teacher who can help you out."

Participant C believed that a good teacher is one who gives students multiple chances to succeed. Reflecting on his experiences with one of his ninth grade teachers, he explained, “I would say with my science teacher, like he allowed you more chances than other teachers would. You had to work for chances, but he allowed more chances than other teachers would. Like if you did bad on a test, he’ll let you redo it, but in order to redo it, you have to correct the test. Then you take the test again.”

Participants D, E, and F spoke about teachers who didn’t give up on them despite their behavior or academic challenges. When they were asked to share their thoughts on the characteristics of a good teacher, they spoke about specific teachers and faculty members with whom they had complicated relationships due to their behavior issues. Participant F shared, “I was mad at Mr.V all the time, but he didn’t just like give up on me. So I was like alright, I shouldn’t be like that to him because he’s actually a good guy. He would come to me personally and talk to me about why I’m missing classes and this and that. I really didn’t care, but it was the fact that he took his time to come and talk to me. It showed me that he was genuine.” Participant D shared, “Mr. D. (the dean) he was just trying to help me out. I always thought he was being hard but I started noticing like, cause him and my mom was having meetings. My teacher wrote me up and called my mom. Mr. D. told my mom that if I would just hang out with the right people, surround myself with positive people and get my grades up, then I could actually go somewhere far in sports.”

It was reported across participants that the ideal characteristics of a good teacher consists of being genuine and the idea of never giving up on students despite their behavior. To aid in their discussion of what constitutes a good teacher, some students

reflected on their negative experiences to help them construct meaning of what a good teacher should look like.

Participant A shared an experience with his ninth grade Science teacher. He recalled lacking the support of his Chemistry teacher during his first year of high school. He reported:

“I was taking advanced classes in ninth grade, you know, so they threw me in chemistry and I’m in class with seniors so that in itself made me feel like I didn’t belong here. There was a certain sense of like I don’t know what I’m doing here, you know...I remember the first day of class, you know, the teacher was taking attendance and my last name starts with an A so my name was the first name on the list and she read it and she said there is a mistake here. I showed her my schedule and said I’m supposed to be here and she was shocked. And even her being shocked when she saw me starting to like fall behind. She never asked me to come after class, never sit down, it wasn’t that. It was basically he got to fend for himself.”

Participant A went on to explain that due to the perceived rejection he felt from this teacher in ninth grade he didn’t learn how to effectively advocate for help later in his high school career. He explained:

“Having that (experience) stopped me from actually asking, like I didn’t ask anybody for help. I was so used to doing things on my own when there were things that I needed people for, I didn’t know how to ask them because I was so used to having to do things by myself and for myself, studying by myself and not having a teacher telling me what to do. There was a lot of Google and Wikipedia

and answers that I used in ninth grade because I had nobody to rely on or ask questions, who actually knew it. My mother didn't know chemistry. My father didn't know it. My grandmother, you know what I mean? I think it helped me and hurt me at the same time because I still to this day don't know how to actually go up to somebody and ask for help. I don't know if it was just that, like I don't know if it's just my character, my personality. I don't know, but I definitely know that had an effect on me, a direct effect because I don't, I can't go up to... Like I'm not saying I can't but I find it weird to go up to a teacher and ask them for extra help, you know what I mean? If I don't know the answer to something or I don't understand something, I'll sit in the back of the class and try and figure it out myself."

Summary of Results

The results of the research identified the factors that African American male high school students reported contributed to their success or failure in ninth grade. The students who successfully passed ninth grade attributed their success to three major themes: positive teacher/student relationships; involvement in extracurricular activities; and self-motivation. The students who successfully completed ninth grade reported that they had teachers that genuinely cared about their achievement. In addition, these students believed that their involvement in extracurricular activities, specifically sports, served as a motivating factor for their success. They also reported being self-motivated and attributed that trait to their success.

The students who failed ninth grade attributed their failure to three major themes: lack of transitional support, uncaring teachers, and feeling invisible. Contrary to the

students who successfully passed ninth grade, the students who failed spoke of having uncaring teachers during their ninth grade year. The retained students also reported feelings of invisibility in classes where they were the only African American students, which subsequently affected their academic performance. They also reported having a lack of support and guidance during their transition from middle school to high school. They believed that if they had more teacher support during this transitional year, they would have been more successful.

Six major themes emerged from the data and were commonly reported by all of the participants. The first theme was Personally Identifying with Teachers, revealing how the participants' relationships with their teachers impacted their academic success. Participants were able to attribute their level of academic success to a teacher with whom they connected either ethnically/racially or by having similar childhood experiences. Some students reported that their academic failure was a consequence of not personally connecting with any of their teachers.

The second theme was the Level of Teacher Care. Participants shared their beliefs regarding the degree to which they perceived a teacher cared about their success, which subsequently affected the degree to which they cared about their academic achievement.

The third theme was Parental Involvement. Participants reported having the support of a parent and were able to attribute their level of academic success to this theme. Most of the participants live with their mothers, and spoke favorably about their mothers' level of involvement in their education.

The fourth theme was Involvement in Extracurricular Activities. The participants, most of whom are athletes, shared the important role that sports played in their academic

careers. The participants also spoke about their involvement in Project Storm, a school club geared towards empowering African American males and promoting their achievement. They also spoke about the positive impact this club has had on their lives.

The fifth theme was School Culture. The participants reported that the culture of the school is positive overall. They spoke about the rich diversity of the school and the inclusion of various racial groups. It was evident from the participants' responses that they believed the school culture was one in which students feel safe.

The sixth theme was Ideal Characteristics of a Good Teacher. The participants drew from both their positive and negative experiences to provide the researcher with a sense of what they believed was characteristic of a good teacher. Common characteristics of willingness to help, the desire to see students succeed, and never giving up on students, were reported by the participants.

The final chapter of this study will provide a detailed summary of the findings and their connection to the literature. Furthermore, implications and recommendations for practice and future research will be identified as well as a discussion of the study's limitations.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

Ninth grade is a critical year for students. It has been described as the “make or break” year in terms of secondary school success or failure (Fulk, 2003, p. 9). The ninth grade year is a challenging year for all students; however, statistically it has proven to be a greater challenge for African American male students (Jenkins, 2010). Twenty-nine percent of Black male ninth graders have been retained or held back at some point between kindergarten and ninth grade, compared with 20% of Latino and 11% of White ninth grade males (Morris 2014). A major factor in increasing the achievement of African American males during the ninth-grade year is the establishment of positive teacher/student relationships (Sudderth, 2009).

Mattering to others at school is a psychosocial construct that has been studied with younger and older adolescents (Tucker et al., 2010). It is defined as the experience of moving through life being noticed by and feeling special to others who also matter to us. Studies show that teachers and other adults that students encounter in school have a strong impact on student success (Somel et al., 2011). When teachers demonstrate a genuine interest in their students’ success, students internalize this interest and it is reflected in their attitudes towards achievement. “When a teacher cares, the student is taught to care; when a teacher does not care, the student displays an attitude of not caring” (Neely et al., 2013, p. 68). This is certainly true for the African American male students who participated in this research study.

The research focused specifically on the perspectives of the African American male students and the factors they identified as contributing to their success or failure in ninth grade. During the course of the interviews, it became evident that the students believed that the degree to which teachers demonstrated care about their students' success affected the degree to which students cared about their achievement. That is to say, some of the students came to understand the importance of academic achievement only when their teachers demonstrated genuine care and commitment to their success. Similarly, ninth-grade students in retention case studies have reported that they "disengage from school when they feel teachers don't care about getting to know them as individuals" (Wheelock et al., 2005, p.4). In addition, it appeared that the participants, both those who successfully completed ninth grade and those who failed, internalized the importance of establishing positive teacher/student relationships and viewed it as an instrumental part of their achievement.

The participants in this study agree with many researchers. They both conclude that the students' experiences of feeling they mattered at school, that their opinions were valued by others, and that they were valued as individuals, helped them to overcome academic challenges and stay motivated (Samel et al., 2011; Tucker et al., 2010). A key component to establishing positive/teacher student relationships is increasing teachers' cultural responsiveness.

Casteel (as cited in Sudderth, 2009) found that African American students tend to feel that their White teachers have difficulty relating to them and consequently their academic achievement is affected. The retained student participants in this study reported feeling culturally disconnected from their teachers which affected their academic

performance. They reported “feeling invisible” in their racially diverse classroom settings. In addition, the retained students reported that their teachers’ were unable to relate to them. Hollins and Guzman (2005) found that a cultural disconnect between teachers and students often occurs in suburban settings, where the staff does not reflect the diversity of the student body. The findings of this research suggest that African American male students, specifically in a suburban public school, perceived a need to be supported by their teachers both academically and emotionally, especially during the critical ninth-grade year. In addition, these students perceived a need for their teachers to be culturally responsive and to demonstrate genuine care and a commitment to their success.

In addition to identifying the challenges to their academic achievement, the participants identified the motivating factors to their achievement. The participants, both those who successfully passed ninth grade and those who failed, spoke about their involvement in extracurricular activities, such as sports teams and school clubs. Two of the three participants that successfully passed ninth grade were athletes, and they credited their involvement in sports as a contributing factor to their success. The three participants that failed ninth grade were also athletes, but due to their failing grades and subsequent ineligibility, they lost the opportunity to play sports. However, they still credited sports as a source of motivation to improve their grades. In addition to their involvement with sports, all of the students spoke about their involvement in Project Storm, a school club geared towards African American males. The participants spoke about the positive support they received from the club advisors and the positive impact the club has had on their lives. The findings of this research suggest that African American males view their

involvement on sports teams and in extracurricular activities that are focused on their empowerment as important keys to their academic achievement.

Implications of Findings

The findings of the study revealed correlations between the theoretical frameworks examined for the study and the participants. The themes that emerged from the interviews supported/demonstrated the importance/relevance of African American students feeling as if they matter to the adults in their schools, the importance of teachers being culturally responsive to their students of color, and the need for extracurricular programs that support African American males.

Mattering to others at school. African American males have been marginalized and stereotyped as problem students with inauspicious futures (Noguera 2008). When these students perceive that their teachers view them in a negative light, their academic achievement is negatively impacted (Tucker et al., 2011). During the course of the interviews, the participants, both those who successfully completed ninth grade and those who failed, acknowledged the importance of being noticed by their teachers. Four of the six participants spoke at length about not connecting with their teachers or feeling as if their teachers didn't care about them as individuals. The students that failed ninth grade spoke extensively about having uncaring teachers, and how their teachers' disinterest in them as individuals was an impetus for them not caring about their progress. Despite the negative experiences some of the students encountered with their teachers, some of the students acknowledged having teachers and/or other faculty members (i.e., school deans, guidance counselors, etc.) that demonstrated genuine care about their success. This was evident in the students' reporting of school faculty members, who regularly checked in

with them, expressed concern about their academic progress, and never gave up on them despite academic setbacks. Similarly, students in the Tucker (2010) study reported that the evidence of their mattering to others at school was found in the mere fact that their school counselor regularly enquired about their school and personal lives. It was evident that the participants have internalized the importance of being noticed by their teachers and/or other faculty members in their school setting.

When the participants were asked to give a brief description of their ideal characteristics of a good teacher, the participants commonly used terms such as “genuine,” “willingness to help,” “wants students to be successful,” and “never giving up on students” as traits of a good teacher. The participants who failed ninth grade, who spoke of having uncaring teachers and/or not having any meaningful relationships with their teachers in ninth grade, attributed their failure to this missing connection. These participants also spoke about the importance of teachers never giving up on their students despite behavioral challenges and other forms of opposition that the students may demonstrate. Studies on teacher efficacy characterize teachers with a high sense of efficacy as teachers who set high goals for all students and utilize a vast repertoire of strategies. They are persistent in their approach, and will try another strategy when one approach is found lacking. (Protheroe, 2008).

In addition, some of the students spoke about their teachers’ inability to relate to them due to their cultural differences. Other students, specifically the students who successfully completed ninth grade, spoke about having a positive experience with the teachers with whom they shared similar ethnic backgrounds and/or childhood experiences.

It was interesting to note that although some of the students spoke about connecting with their teachers due to similar backgrounds and/or ethnicities, most of the students did not report having a cultural connection with the teachers that demonstrated a significant level of care for their success. The cultural disconnects between teachers and students that are often characteristic of suburban schools (Sudderth, 2009) did not appear to be an indicator of a teacher's ability to demonstrate care for their students. When the students were asked to provide their ideal characteristics of a good teacher, none of the students indicated race/ethnicity as being an important characteristic. A teacher's ability to demonstrate that students, especially African American male students, matter and are a significant part of the school community can be accomplished despite cultural mismatches between teacher and student demographics. It is important to note, that for some of the participants in this study, who lacked a connection to a caring teacher, their academic achievement was greatly impacted.

Cultural responsiveness. When examining the students' responses and the factors they identified that contributed to their success or failure, three of the six participants spoke positively about having a teacher with whom they were able to culturally connect. They shared how having a teacher that came from either their birthplace or even having similar childhood experiences was a meaningful experience. Cultural responsiveness refers to the symbiotic relationship between the home/community culture of the student and the school culture (Ladson-Billings, 1995). When students perceive that their teachers are culturally responsive or culturally aware of their students, their achievement is positively impacted.

One of the participants that failed shared how he believed his ninth-grade experience would have been different if he had teachers who understood him as an African American male and could relate to his interests. Cultural responsiveness is especially important in suburban school settings, where the staff demographics are often misaligned to student demographics. Sudderth (2009) found that the cultural disparities that exist between students and staff are characterized by teachers being unfamiliar with and/or ill-equipped to respond adequately to diverse student cultures, backgrounds, norms, and belief systems. It was evident from the students' responses that they perceived a need for their teachers to be able to culturally connect with them.

Involvement in extracurricular activities. Project Storm is a program focused on promoting the achievement of African American males. The program stresses the importance of academic success, specifically for African American males. Its aim is to build strong moral character, and help shape young, African American males into productive citizens. The program's mission statement includes reducing negative behaviors that can hinder the academic success of African American males, such as cutting classes and receiving referrals for inappropriate behavior. The program also strives to increase the enrollment of African American males in college-level classes and decrease the number of students opting for GEDs. In addition, the program provides students with personal support and mentorship. From the interviews, it was apparent that Project Storm had a positive impact upon the study participants. When the participants were asked to elaborate on their experiences with the program, the students used words and phrases such as "brotherhood" and "show people that we are on the same level." The students also spoke about the program advisors, and how the students view them as

positive role models. It is apparent that Project Storm is a program that provides African American males with the support and acknowledgement that is critical to their achievement.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations within the study. The first limitation is the sample size. The research included six participants. The total population within the criteria set by the study was approximately ten, but due to the regulations set forth for using minors in a study and the need for parental consent, the sample size was reduced. A small sample size also limited the researcher's ability to validate findings through triangulation. The researcher's findings and analysis were limited to the interview transcripts. In addition, the timing of the study conflicted with the students' testing schedules and end-of-the-school-year activities, which reduced the availability of students.

Another limitation of the study concerned the self-reporting nature of the data received. The study focused on the perspectives of the students themselves. Although this provided the participants with an opportunity to reflect on their ninth-grade experiences and share their perspectives, this limited the opportunity for the study to have multiple perspectives on the issue. For example, teachers, administrators, and parents were not interviewed/surveyed for their perspectives, which could have provided another layer of meaning to the study overall.

In addition, the participants were selected by the school's administrative and guidance staff. Students were selected to participate based on the staff's interpretation of the successful completion of ninth grade. Also, due to the limitation of the students'

experiences of attending suburban schools and not urban schools, the students were unable to speak about the differences between the urban system and the suburban system. Their understanding of diversity and cultural responsiveness was limited to the suburban school district they attended.

The final limitation of the study was the researcher's inability to address all of the research questions with the participants. As noted previously, the students' limited experiences of attending only suburban schools, hindered the students from being able to address research questions 1d and 2d.

Recommendations

This qualitative study examined the perspectives of African American male high school students and the factors they identified as contributing to their success or failure in ninth grade in a public suburban high school. While there are numerous studies that examine the achievement gap between African American male students and their White counterparts and analyze the factors that contribute to the disparity, most of these studies focus on urban environments. Fewer studies focus on suburban environments. There is also little attention given to the students' perspectives and the factors they identify as contributing to their success or failure. By examining the students' perceptions, specifically in terms of what they deem as important factors leading to their achievement and hindrances to their academic progress, high school administration and teaching staff could better serve this subgroup of students who have statistically performed lower than any other subgroup.

In addition, further research could be conducted to further investigate how the identified factors can improve the achievement of African American males, especially

during the critical year of ninth grade. Specifically, the research could look for correlations between the cultural competencies of teachers and the academic achievement of African American male students. This could possibly assist administrators in the process of increasing teacher efficacy and strengthening teacher/student relationships. These studies could continue to provide information to suburban schools on how best to foster and support African American male students, and increase their overall achievement. Furthermore, it is recommended that a replication of the study be conducted in different sites, with a larger pool of participants. Research conducted in both urban and suburban schools could inform the research and provide an in-depth analysis of the students' perspectives in these settings. The findings of this study do offer enough data to support the following recommendations for practice.

Build a school culture established on the theory of mattering to others at school. When students perceive that their teachers care about their success and recognize them as individuals, their level of engagement and academic achievement is positively affected. The participants in this study reported on the positive impact of having teachers and/or other faculty members who demonstrated through their actions that their students mattered to them and that they valued them as individuals. This was a motivating factor that the participants identified as contributing to their success. If schools could work with not only their teaching staff, but with all faculty members to create an environment where all students believe that they matter to the adults in the building, the achievement of all students could be positively impacted. The participants in this study noted very simple, yet meaningful acts performed by teachers and other school faculty members. When their teachers and/or other faculty members checked in with the students regularly

and inquired about their progress, this demonstrated that the students were deemed as valuable members of the school community, and that they mattered to the adults in their school. Although most of the participants spoke of having supportive parents, the students acknowledged the benefit of having supportive adults in school. It is recommended that all schools build a culture where every student is known and acknowledged by at least one adult in the building. If school staff members work together to ensure that every student is known by at least one adult in the building, the achievement of all students would be positively impacted.

Increase the cultural competency of teachers in suburban public schools. Due to rapidly changing demographics, especially in suburban school districts, there is a great need for school staff and administration to be culturally responsive to their diverse student populations. With approximately one third of all African Americans living in suburban communities and their children attending suburban schools, schools are charged with the responsibility of ensuring that these students are receiving the necessary supports to be successful (Gordon, 2012). Teachers need to be equipped in order to best support students, especially African American male students. In order to help teachers be culturally responsive to their students, they will need professional development that addresses this issue. A key part of that professional development will entail changing the mindsets of teachers concerning African American males. If teachers change the way in which they view African American males as well as change the academic expectations that they have for these students, the achievement of African American males will be positively impacted.

Developing a growth mindset. A fixed mindset is a belief in fixed traits. Teachers with a fixed mindset believe that their students' capabilities and future achievement are measured by their current level of ability (Dweck 2012). They also believe that they cannot influence the intellectual ability of their students (Dweck 2012). In addition, teachers with a fixed mindset negatively influence their students to have the same mindset about themselves, which can consequently affect their academic performance (Dweck 2012). Dweck (2012) posits that people with a fixed mindset are “always in danger of being measured by failure. It can define them in a permanent way” (p.39). This is critical for retained students. If these students are taught to have a fixed mindset about their abilities, and view their failure as something that cannot be overcome, their future achievement could be gravely impacted.

On the contrary, a growth mindset is based on the premise that your basic skills and abilities are things you cultivate through time and effort. Teachers with a growth mindset believe that all children, regardless of their current level of ability, past failures, and/or ethnicity, can develop their academic skills. Students of teachers with a growth mindset will see themselves as academically capable. More importantly, retained students of teachers with a growth mindset will not be scarred by failure; they will see it as an opportunity to develop (Dweck 2012). A key factor in building the cultural competency of teachers is helping them to see their students, especially African American male students, through the lens of a growth mindset. If teachers change their mindsets about African American male students, they will affect the mindset that these students have about themselves. In addition, this mindset change will help African American males to be resilient during academically challenging times.

Increase resiliency in African American male students. During the interviews with the participants that successfully completed ninth grade, it was evident that these students were able to persist even during academic challenges. I found these students to be self-motivated even during the absence of a caring teacher. One of the three successful participants spoke about his parents' inability to help with his homework. He also shared that he did not have a teacher during his ninth-grade year that was willing to help him, but despite these challenges the student persevered. Two of the three participants shared that they utilized several strategies when they faced academic challenges. The students shared that they sought extra help from other teachers if they didn't feel comfortable in meeting with their assigned teachers. They also utilized the Internet and other supplemental materials that could aid them in their progress. The students credited their difficult academic experiences for helping them achieve academic success. Similar to the concept of mattering to others at school and the growth mindset, resiliency can be nurtured and developed. When teachers and schools work effectively together to increase resiliency students can obtain academic success (Samel et al., 2011).

Create more extracurricular clubs and programs focused on African American male achievement. The data reveals that African American males perceive a need to be part of a school team or extracurricular club in which they feel as if they're valuable members. The participants spoke positively about their involvement with Project Storm. They took pride in being part of a "brotherhood" that is focused on supporting their success. It is recommended that more programs be created with an emphasis on promoting the achievement of African American males. It is also recommended that the individuals selected to facilitate these programs are adults within

the school who can be positive role models for the students. It is evident that programs of this nature can provide African American males with the academic, social, and emotional support needed to be successful.

Conclusion

The ninth-grade experience for African American males has statistically been more challenging than the transitional experiences of their counterparts. The level of success achieved during the transitional year from middle school to high school has been linked with the probability of students graduating from high school (Jenkins, 2010). When students fail ninth grade, the probability of these students dropping out of high school increases. The probability is even higher for African American students. For African American males, failure to complete ninth grade and to subsequently drop out of high school, leads to an increased probability for unemployment and incarceration (Sweeten et al., 2009). However, improving the ninth-grade experience for African American males can contribute to their successful completion of ninth grade and their subsequent graduation from high school.

The findings of this study reveal that African American male students perceive a need to be supported, recognized, and valued in their school environments. This is especially true in suburban school districts, where African American students make up a small portion of the school population. It is imperative that teachers in these diverse school settings be culturally responsive and demonstrate a genuine interest in their students as individuals as well as in their academic success. The academic achievement of African American males can be positively impacted when teachers, administrators, and other school faculty members convey to African American males that their lives matter

and that they are valuable members of the school community. This message is important to convey especially during the challenging times society is facing.

With the growing number of incidents of police-involved violence toward young Black males, and the increasing acts of racial bias, it is critical that schools create a learning environment that is culturally responsive to African American male students and promotes their success. To help combat negative media stereotypes about African American males and the fixed mindsets about their abilities, school districts need to implement the practices that emerged as recommendations from this study.

When teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators work together to build a school culture established around the concept of mattering to others at school, all students, including African American males, will benefit. They will come to understand through clear demonstrations of care from school faculty members that they are valued.

Increasing the cultural competency of teachers in suburban public high schools will help teachers be better equipped to address the needs of African American male students. An essential part of this process is changing the mindsets of teachers about African American male students, which will in turn affect the way in which these students view themselves and their ability to achieve.

Increasing resiliency in African American male students will aid in their ability to persevere through academically challenging times. This will also help them develop the skills needed to be successful, not only during ninth grade but also throughout their high school careers.

Creating more extracurricular clubs and programs focused on African American male achievement is also a recommended practice. Programs like Project Storm helps

students strive for success and see themselves as valuable members of the school community. Programs of this nature also provide African American males with additional academic and emotional support to aid in their overall success. When teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators demonstrate through their caring attitudes, purposeful interactions with students, and the creation of meaningful and relevant school programs that they are genuinely committed to their students' success, all students will have a better opportunity to successfully navigate the ninth grade, complete high school, and prepare for their future.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent Form

St. John Fisher College INFORMED CONSENT FORM (for use with minors)

Title of study: The Retention of Black Males in Ninth Grade in a Suburban High School
Name(s) of researcher(s): Tracy Smith **Phone for further information:** (914) 318-6405

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Frances Wills **Phone for further information:** (914) 312-3641

Purpose of study: The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the transition experience of ninth grade students from the students' perspectives. Thus, the study will inform the research on the barriers to the academic achievement of Black males in ninth grade, and their subsequent failure to complete high school in suburban communities. The study will also analyze the social and cultural factors that are prevalent in suburban schools and contribute to the academic challenges faced by Black males.

Place of study: Ossining High School in Ossining, New York

Length of participation: One-two, 40 minute interviews will be conducted with each participant. The interviews will be conducted over a period of two weeks.

Risks and benefits: **The expected risks and benefits of participation in this study are explained below:**

There are no direct benefits to the individuals that participate. There are no identified, potential risks to the participants discussing personal information associated with academic challenges

Method of Compensation, if any: N/A

Method of protecting confidentiality/privacy: The researcher will protect the confidentiality of participants, school, and community with the use of pseudonyms. The audio recordings and the pseudonyms will be destroyed.

Your rights: As the parent/guardian of a research participant, you have the right to:

1. Have the purpose of the study, and the expected risks and benefits fully explained to you before you choose to allow your minor child to participate.

2. Withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.
3. Refuse to answer a particular question without penalty.
4. Be informed of appropriate alternative procedures or courses of treatment, if any, that might be advantageous to you or your minor child.
5. Be informed of the results of the study.

**I, the parent or guardian of _____, a minor
 _____ years of age, consent to his/her participation in the above-named study.
 I have received a copy of this form.**

 Print name (Parent/Guardian) Signature Date

 Print name (Investigator) Signature Date

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please contact the researcher listed above. If you or your child experience emotional or physical discomfort due to participation in this study, contact the School Psychologist at Ossining High School, Esther Sohn at 914-762-2305.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of St. John Fisher College has reviewed this project. For any concerns regarding confidentiality, please call Jill Rathbun at (585) 385-8012. She will direct your call to a member of the IRB at St. John Fisher College.

Appendix B

The Interview Protocol

Interview Questions

Note: the following questions were asked to both groups of students: those who failed ninth grade and those who successfully completed ninth grade.

1. How do you feel about being a student?
 - 1a. Do you believe a high school education is necessary and relevant to your future career goals? Why or why not?

2. How would you describe your freshman year?
 - 2a. Were you involved in any after school clubs or part of a sports team?

 - 2b. What were some of the high points of 9th grade? What were some of the low point of 9th grade?
 - 2c. When you experienced difficult times during 9th grade, what did you do in order to overcome the difficulties? Were you successful?

 - 2d. Did you have the support of any adults/teachers/faculty members to help you through the difficult times? Were their specific teachers or faculty members that you believe cared if you were successful in 9th grade? Can you identify them and explain how they helped you? Do not say their name. Identify them by the subject they teach or their role in the school. If you did not have the support of any adults, do you think that would've made a difference?

 - 2e. What do you think would have made your 9th grade year a successful first year of high school?

3. Do you have any teachers that you personally identify and/or connect with in ways that you do not connect or identify with other teachers? Do not say their name, but identify them based on their role in the school (i.e. math teacher).
 - 3a. Why do you think you are able to connect with some teachers and not others?
 - 3b. Do you believe that the teachers you connect with have certain personality traits or special characteristics that some teachers do not have? What are these traits and/or characteristics?
 - 3c. Why do you believe these personality traits/special characteristics are important for teachers to have in order for students to be successful?

4. If I was a new student, how would you describe the following aspects of the high school:

The student body- what are the different groups of students that exist in the school? How is each group treated by teachers/staff? How do the different groups coexist together in the building?

The degree to which you believe teachers care about their students' success- do they care very much or not much at all

What makes this school a unique school? Do you believe students who attend this school have a higher chance of being successful because it is a suburban school and not a city school or like most schools?

5. How important do you think it is to get good grades in 9th grade compared to getting good grades in 12th grade?

Appendix C

The Interview Protocol Student Questionnaire

NOTE: Students were asked to complete this profile prior to the interview.

Nickname:

Age:

Grade:

Family:

How many brothers and/or sisters do you have?

Are you the youngest or oldest?

Parents' Career:

Interests:

Favorite Artists:

Favorite TV Show:

Favorite Movie:

What would you like to do after high school? How do you imagine your life after high school? What will it look like? What do you see yourself doing? Where do you see yourself living?