UNDERSTANDING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF AT-RISK BLACK MALES AS IT RELATES TO THEIR ACADEMIC SUCCESS

By

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Dedicated to everyone who believed in me, thank you!
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LIST OF TERMS

AFROCENTRIC: A paradigm based on the idea that African-Americans should understand and identify with their own culture to achieve sanity and overcome oppression. It encourages African Americans to shift their focus from identifying and interpreting information from majority or “white dominated perspective” to their own or “Black perspective” when interpreting most information in the American academy (http://theafrocentricexperience.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=129&Itemid=138).

BOY CODE: A set of cultural norms, messages that are transmitted through society, across the board, that explains what it means to be a boy in today’s society. The messages generally include the following themes “be a big boy”, “be a little man”, “cut the apron strings” and “big boys don’t cry”. Due to boy codes boy are taught to hide their natural feelings to avoid being called a “wimp” or “girl” (Pollack, 1999).

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE INSTRUCTION: Using cultural knowledge, lived experiences (community, family, environment) and performance ability of diverse learners to make learning more available and effective for them; it operates from a strengths based approach tapping into unique skills of each student (Gay, 2000).

CYBERNETICS: Studying how a system functions, “it focuses on how systems use information, models, and control actions to steer towards and maintain their goals, while counteracting various disturbances (Heylighen & Joslyn, p.2, 2001).

FICTIVE KINSHIP: Adoption of values and morals that are contrary to the majority or White society (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986)

FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE: Using community and household resources experienced by the student to organize classroom instruction to increase the capacity of learning opportunities for all students, especially minority students (Moll & Greenberg, 1990).

INDUCTIVE ANALYSIS: Identifying patterns of meaning in data to develop general statements about phenomena under investigation (Hatch, 2002).

PHENOMENOLOGY: A lived experience and meaning is created in the moment, in the experience between researcher and subject (Husserl, 1931).
SECOND ORDER CYBERGENETICS

Studies the role of the subject (human) and the construction of meaning the subject makes based on the experiences lived within their various systems. It examines the construction of stories and messages that are received from all contexts and examines how these messages are interpreted into meaning and understanding which constructs how the subject views the world and engages in communication (Amatea & Sherrard, 1995; Heylighen & Joslyn, 2001).

STRENGTH BASED COUNSELING

Focuses on helping students identify and build on their strengths and competencies as well as develop additional strengths that are associated with positive development (Galassi & Akos, 2007).
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UNDERSTANDING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF AT-RISK BLACK MALES AS IT
RELATES TO THEIR ACADEMIC SUCCESS

By

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Chair: Mary Ann Clark
Major: Marriage and Family Counseling

Through an ecological systems perspective, this study explores factors that
influence successful academic achievement for at-risk African American males. The
purpose of this qualitative study was to examine factors that contribute to the successful
achievement and advancement to higher education for African American males from at-
risk populations. The researcher explores African American boys’ lived experiences and
what they believe has contributed to their success in school. By understanding the
interconnectedness of lived systems, educators and counselors are able to encourage
engagement in academics, as well as develop personal and racial identity. Findings will
explore the independence interdependency of systems in the development of self-
concept for these youth and suggest the link between the development of a positive
self-concept, esteem, confidence, and educational success. These findings have
implications for promoting academic success through community involvement and
program support for this population.
CHAPTER 1
BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Introduction to the Problem

Today’s African American male adolescents are faced with obstacles that limit their academic future and success. The growing gap in achievement and dropout rates between African American and Latino students and their majority Caucasian counterparts in America is alarming. Information presented in the 2000 U.S. Census stated that 48% of the Latino population, twenty-five years and older, did not possess a high school diploma (Kiyama, 2010). Additionally, it was reported nationally that 47% of African American adolescent males dropped out in the year 2008 (Ellis, 2010). These current statistics call for action from educators and counselors to understand minority culture and trends, and to begin developing and implementing interventions to improve retention and academic success for minority students in public education.

Reviewing the history of African American education in the United States it is clear that African Americans have been victim to exploitation (slavery), subordination, and discrimination by Caucasians, the majority group. (Howard-Hamilton & Behar-Horenstein, 1995; Jordan, 2005). Jordan (1995) argues that the role of education for African Americans in the South historically was to accept and adjust to their subordinate role in society, assuming a false belief of mental inferiority. Young Black men that cannot develop their own racial identity separate from their White counterparts will suffer greater psychological distress and lowered self esteem (Mahalik, Pierre & Wan, 2006)

There have been many struggles for African Americans for basic civil rights and the opportunity for equal education (Wyatt, 2009). This oppression has influenced many
African Americans to perceive society as the oppressor and a barrier toward advancement in education and work (Howard-Hamilton & Behar-Horenstein, 1995; Jordan, 2005; Mahalik, Pierre & Wan 2006). Due to oppression and the beliefs generated by the oppressor many African American students believe that dedicating time and energy to schoolwork will not produce equal opportunities when comparing themselves to the majority population (Harper, 2007, Howard-Hamilton & Behar-Horenstein, 1995; Taylor, Casten, Flickinger, Roberts & Fulmore, 1994). In efforts to cope with oppression it is suggested by Fordham and Ogbu (1986) that African American communities have formed fictive kinship, defined as the adoption of values and morals that are contrary to the White Society. By defying the majority group a certain sense of empowerment may be attained (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Harper, 2007). By not speaking standard English, not being on time, and not working hard in school (opposite deemed white behaviors), all characteristics of fictive kinship African Americans are at greater risk of failure and/or dropout in school (Howard-Hamilton & Behar-Horenstein, 1995; McMillian, 2003).

African Americans have persevered through slavery, War Between the States, segregation, civil rights, identity and establishing their voice in America. Despite the many social and economic gains experienced by many African Americans over the last one hundred years, a growing epidemic in our educational system raises alarm for positive postsecondary outcomes for African American males (Joe & Davis, 2009; Lewin, 2006; Neblett Jr., Chavous, Nguyen & Sellers, 2009; Rashad, 2009; Rowley & Bowman, 2009; Whiting, 2009). Forty-seven percent of all African American males drop out of school nationally each year (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011;
Whiting, 2009). The state of Florida reported 35.1% of African American males in 2008-2009 dropped out of high school (Florida Department of Education, 2010). African American males are at risk of academic failure and without interventions imposed by educators are faced with limited opportunities post adolescence based on the data provided by the National Center for Educational Statistics (2011).

**Theoretical Framework**

**Black Racial Identity Theory**

Black racial identity theory was created by William Cross in 1971. Black racial identity theory explores the developmental process of a person’s experience becoming black (Helms, 1993). The theory’s stages are characterized by an individual’s perceptions of oneself and how they identify to their reference group, whether it is white or black (Cross, 1971; Ford, 1997; Helms, 1993). Amendments were made to Cross’s model by Helms (1986) to include “worldview” within each stage, explaining that within each stage people situate themselves based on information about self, other people, institutions and their environment (Helms, 1993).

Black racial identity theory, developed by Cross (1971) helps to explain how racial oppression is an additional developmental hurdle experienced by African Americans and how this oppression can influence their psychological development (Chavous, et al., 2003; Coard, Breland, & Raskin, 2001; Cross, 1971; Helms, 1993). Cross believed this racial oppression was separate from the aspects of self actualization as defined by Maslow (1970) which is that all human beings strive to be the best that they can be (Helms, 1993).

Black racial identity theory consists of five stages. The original five stages that were developed are pre-encounter, encounter, immersion/emersion, emersion and
internalization (Helms, 1993). Revisions to the model have occurred over the last forty years with the most recent revision consisting of pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion and internalization (Worrell, Cross & Vandiver, 2001). At each of these stages, African Americans evolve, becoming more intrinsically aware of their Black heritage, and oppression they have experienced while developing a greater sense of self and identity (Coard, Breland & Raskin, 2001; Cross, 1971; Harper, 2007; Helms, 1993).

It is important to understand black racial identity theory when working with African American male adolescents. Chavous (2003) states that the role of racial identity beliefs predicts educational achievement. Identifying where an African American adolescent is situated within the stages can help educators and counselors work to improve achievement (Chavous et al. 2003; Ford & Harris, 1997; Harper, 2007). Guiding an African American adolescent male through the stages of the theory will help dispel the youth’s myths of inferiority while building a positive racial self concept (Harper, 2007). By reaching the final stage, internalization, behaviors and attitudes of the African American adolescent male become more internalized creating a greater outcome for academic achievement (Chavous et al., 2003; Ford & Harris, 1997; Harper, 2007).

Additionally, Duncan (2005) states completion of all stages of the black racial identity model as a completion of life span. Duncan (2005) suggests that work through the stages to internalization moves the African American from adolescence toward a mature, introspective, respectable adult. Therefore when investigating African American male underachievement, black racial identity theory can serve as guide to help educators and counselors find a starting point to provide appropriate services (Chavous...
Ecological Systems Theory

Assuming an ecological perspective is important in understanding African American male underachievement. An ecological systems approach is best in understanding the phenomena in male underachievement because it investigates relational, contextual and situational factors (Peirson, Boydell, Ferguson & Ferris, 2011). Using an ecological systems perspective allows the researcher to shift the focus of inquiry from the individuals to understanding the “interplay of macro, meso, and micro levels; people, settings and events; decisions, actions and impacts; research policy and practice; social, political and economic forces; and historical contemporary and visionary influences” (Peirson et al., 2011, p. 309). Ecological systemic thinking provides insight to the researcher to understand within the subjects’ lived experience where positive and negative influences exist within their various systems (Kelly, 2007). Investigating and interpreting the interplay of systems within the subject’s world exposes strengths that may be identified as preventive interventions (Pierson et al., 2011).

To effect change a researcher must look beyond just identifying the subjects’ systems (Kelly, 2007). When investigating a subject’s world it is important to understand how the systems are interdependent and how the interactions affect the subject (Foster-Fishman & Beherens, 2008). When social scientists can understand the interdependence, patterns and consequences of interactions they can create and implement suggestions that promote positive change (Foster-Fishman & Beherens, 2008). Researchers should be identifying strengths along with weaknesses when investigating and understanding interactions within a subject’s systems (Foster-Fishman et al., 2003; Chavous, Rivas-Drake, Smalls, Griffin & Cogburn, 2008; Ford & Harris, 1997).
& Beherens, 2008; Kelly, 2007; Pierson et al., 2011). Ecological systemic theory creates a strength based model for investigation when appropriately implemented (Foster-Fishman & Beherens, 2008; Kelly 2007).

Racism, oppression, matriarchal families, SES, masculinity and not embracing a culturally responsive curriculum creates disadvantages for African American males when compared to middle class White males (Currie, 2005; Gay, 2000; Hooks, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1992; Noguera, 2003; Pollack; 1998; Rodney & Mupier, 1999). African American males must overcome multiple hurdles in their life experienced in family, community and school systems to just reach the baseline experienced by middle class students upon entering grade school (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2010; Milne & Plourde, 2006; Rodney & Mupier, 1999). These challenges experienced in their various systems and the interaction of the aforementioned systems create great resilience and achievement or create anger and resentment which leads to counter culture behaviors, rejecting education as a pathway that will create opportunity and financial stability (Boykin, Tyler, Watkins-Lewis & Kizzie, 2006; Howard-Hamilton & Behar-Hornstein, 1995; van den Bergh, Denessen, Hornstra, Voeten & Holland, 2010). Framing African American male achievement through a ecological systemic lens creates opportunity for insight into factors that contribute to and impede academic success in public education from a holistic view.

**Statement of the Problem**

There appear to be four macro level systemic problems that contribute to academic failure. A matriarchal family system, socio-economic status, perceptions of masculinity, and lack of multicultural awareness, and acceptance in schools contributes to academic struggles for African American males in education (Currie, 2005; Harper et
al., 2009; Pollack, 2006; Wyatt, 2009). These aforementioned systems independently and jointly can create barriers for African American males in schools. Each system is briefly detailed and will be explained further in Chapter 2, the literature review.

**Single Parent Family System**

It is more common for African American children to be raised in single parent families than a traditional two parent nuclear family (Rodney & Mupier, 1999). African American males from Matriarchal families are at greater risk of experiencing psychosocial problems and academic failure when compared to peers that come from two-parent homes (Sterrett, Jones, & Kincaid, 2009). Often African American males have no contact or limited contact with their biological father. Not having a positive male role model in an African American males’ life can lead to emotional distress and at risk behavior (Harper, Terry, & Twiggs, 2009; Parker, & Maggard, 2009).

Identification with a positive African American male role model for adolescent African American males establishes a relationship that allows for dialogue about African American cultural values (Mahalik, Pierre, & Wan, 2006; Sterrett et al., 2009). African American males that do not have a positive male role model in their lives have difficulty developing their racial identity (Harper, et al., 2009; Parker, & Maggard, 2009). Having no positive male role model leads to confusion in their identity resulting in lowered self esteem, and confidence in school (Harper, et al., 2009). Not identifying with a positive male role model makes these boys more apt to join gangs to find belonging which can influence achievement in schools (Mahalik, et al., 2006; Parker & Maggard, 2009; Sterrett, et al., 2009). Allowing space for racial identity development will improve the adolescent’s mental health, increasing self esteem and decreasing psychological distress (Mahalik, et al., 2006).
Absent fathers in African American households is not a myth, but a lived experience for African American children (Dorsey, Forehand & Brody, 2007). The dynamics of having a single parent household have many disadvantages and increased stress for the family in addition to academic underachievement (Dorsey, et al., 2007). Single parent families experience financial burdens, greater exposure to crime and drugs within their community due to income status and affordable housing, as well as psychological stress due to the aforementioned variable (Paschalk, Ringwalt & Flewelling, 2003). When comparing single African American mothers to two parent families, single mothers experience limited financial resources, greater isolation, and possess fewer coping strategies and resources, which impact their ability to supervise, guide and appropriately communicate with their children (McLoyd, Jayarante, Ceballo & Borquez, 1994; Paschalk, et al., 2003). The stress of often working two jobs, limited availability to their children, as well as distress in the lives of these single African American mothers increases the risk of their children failing academically and increases risk of their drug use and criminal activity (Mahlik, et al., 2006; Noguera, 2003; Paschalk, et al., 2003; Rodney & Mupier, 1999). All of these challenges experienced by African American children from Matriarchal families create greater risk of academic failure and limits post secondary opportunity when compared to White middle class children that live in traditional nuclear families (Rodney & Mupier, 1999).

**Socioeconomic Class**

Another barrier experienced by African American male boys when trying to succeed academically is their socioeconomic status. Most Black males are raised in Matriarchal single parent families, placing these youth in a low socioeconomic status (Rodney & Mupier, 1999). There are many barriers presented for youth being raised
and educated in a middle-lower and low socioeconomic background (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2010; Goodman, et al., 2003; Rodney & Mupier, 1999). These youth often experience less supervised time afterschool, exposure to drug and gang culture, crime and lack access to quality health care (Currie, 2005; Parker & Maggard, 2009; Noguera, 2003). Great disparities in health care access such as services and treatment exist for African American males when compared to their White middle class counterparts. These disparities influence academic availability and ultimately academic achievement due to being chronically physically ill (Currie, 2005). Poorer health care leads to more days of school missed, reduced mental functioning that increases the probability of mental health problems and greater levels of distress in their life when compared to children who have adequate health care plans (Currie, 2005).

Children who are reared in single parent families that are poor and live in high poverty communities are less ready to learn upon entering school (Milne & Plourde, 2006; Vail, 2004). Typically these students lag behind more privileged classmates in language development and problem solving ability in the classroom (Vail, 2004). Nutrition is also a factor that affects children that come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Poor nutrition is associated with obesity and greater health risks and illness (Goodman, et al., 2003). In addition to these findings Vail (2004) argues that by not being able to provide an adequate breakfast due to poverty, students experience difficulty in paying attention which will impact their academic success. These findings suggest that SES affect students’ well being, overall health, cognitive development and academic achievement (Milne & Plourde, 2006).
Perceptions of Masculinity

Masculinity is defined by the Oxford American dictionary as “having the qualities or appearance traditionally associated with men” (Oxford, p.503, 2008). Masculinity influences boys’ thoughts and behavior, which negatively impacts educational achievement due to traditional masculine views of behavior and masculine attitudes toward school (Pollack, 1999). Boys are taught to be tough, not to cry, and to not act like a girl (Hooks, 2004, Pollack, 1999). Boys and men are influenced through culture not to show signs of weakness which leads to a false sense of esteem, and bravado (Pollack, 1999). This bravado outwardly makes boys appear confident and strong when inwardly they are suffering from low self esteem and worries that they cannot achieve academically (Pollack, 1999, 2006). Boys have greater difficulty asking for help because they associate asking for help as feminine which can create further deficits in learning (Jackson and Dempster, 2009; Levant, 2001; Pollack, 1999, 2006).

Effortless achievement is what is created due to masculinity. Effortless achievement is when boys outwardly denounce education and work to their friends to appear cool (Jackson and Dempster, 2009). To the classroom system and peer group, boys appear to place no effort in their school work, yet behind closed doors they work diligently to complete school work, so they can achieve (Jackson & Dempster, 2009; Pollack, 1999). If these students do fail by chance they tell their peers groups that it was not due to lack of ability, rather the lack of effort that they put into the assignment (Jackson and Dempster, 2009). Contrastingly, if these boys do exceptionally well they present their achievement as effortless achievement, which is associated with high intellectual ability (Jackson and Dempster, 2009). This creates a difficult struggle for young boys internally as they try to balance being cool, a masculine man outwardly to
others, while trying to maintain a feeling of self worth and achievement silently (Juelskjaer, 2008; Martino, 2000). These internal conflicts can lead to mental health issues that will have a negative impact on academic achievement, identity and emotional development (Simons, Van Rheenen, & Covington, 1999).

**Multicultural Components**

Ethnic identity awareness influences self esteem which contributes to academic success or failure for African American boys (Howard-Hamilton and Behar-Horenstein 1995; Mahalik, et al., 2006; van den Bergh, Denessen, Hornstra, Voeten and Holland, 2010) Peer pressure can also affect academic achievement for minorities (Howard-Hamilton and Behar-Horenstein 1995). All boys, but especially minority boys, must struggle with their identity as they progress through several stages of development until they are able to accept their own racial identity despite the values, beliefs and identity imposed by the majority ethnicity (Cross, 1971; Helms 1986,1993). Developing and understanding one’s racial identity is crucial towards academic success (Helms, 1993; Howard-Hamilton & Behar-Horenstein, 1995). Stunted identity development creates lowered self esteem which leads to academic failure (Helms, 1993; Howard-Hamilton & Behar-Hornstein, 1995).

Academic problems arise in the public school setting when educators do not embrace all ethnicities by not providing diverse opportunities to learn (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Research has found that African American students prefer more spirited and communal learning opportunities than the traditional majority viewed style of individualistic and competitive contexts often delivered by traditional teachers (Boykin, Tyler, Watkins-Lewis & Kizzie 2006). These students thrive when they are afforded the opportunity to work together and the curriculum is stimulating (Boykin et al.,
As aforementioned, van den Bergh, et al. (2010) propose that the need to match learning style along with curriculum that is culturally responsive will create engagement in the classroom. When culturally responsive curriculum is not created possible lack of engagement and struggle with identity may occur from minority groups (Gay, 2000; Howard-Hamilton & Behar-Horenstein 1995; Wyatt 2009).

Some educators may hold implicit prejudice toward minority students, thus perpetuating the ethnic achievement gap due to unknown or unaware prejudice (van den Bergh, et al., 2010). Many educators, especially if they are from the majority race, often are not aware of their own white privilege. White privilege is defined as implicit and often explicit advantages that white people accrue from society creating an unequal balance of power and position when compared to minority races. (Stewart, Latu, Branscombe, Phillips, & Ted, 2012). White privilege poses a problem as it forces minority students to assimilate to the majority culture. As their own culture is being overlooked a result could be the creation of problems with cultural identity, self esteem, and a lack of connection with the educator, and pose negative views and attitudes toward school (Cross, 1971; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Harper, 2007). It was found that implicit measures of prejudiced attitudes of teachers influenced teacher expectations and student achievement of minority students more than the teachers’ explicit measure of prejudiced attitudes (van den Bergh, et al., 2010). This finding suggests that workshops be held for teachers exposing and discussing white privilege in efforts to bring awareness to teachers of their implicit values and beliefs toward minorities.

**Results from the Interactions of Macro Systems**

African American males are at risk for dropping out of high school according to national statistics (NCES, 2011). Interactions between macro systems contribute to this
current epidemic in America. Negative outcomes for African American males include lack of positive male role models, low academic expectations, perceptions of masculinity, gang affiliation, culturally insensitive curriculum and the misunderstanding of the male student due to their lived experiences in their various systems (Bailey & Paisley, 2004). One in four African American adolescent males are involved in the juvenile justice system and are either incarcerated or under court supervision (Bailey & Paisley, 2004). Additionally, there is an overrepresentation of African American males enrolled in special education services which the literature states is due to biased referral and assessment procedures of minority students (Green, 2005; Jordan, 2005; Shapiro, Loeb & Bowermaster, 1993; Watkins & Kurtz, 2001).

African Americans comprise 12.2% of the total population of students served in special education services nationally in 2007 compared to 8.5% Caucasian, 8.5% Latino and 14.3% Native American and Alaskan (NCES, 2011). One more factor that is contributing to academic failure is unsupervised time after school (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2010; Woodland, 2008). Unstructured, unsupervised time after school especially for African American males living in urban areas greatly increases their chances of participating in criminal behavior such as gang related activities, violence and drug dealing (Noguera, 2005). Often engagement in these activities is due to a responsibility to help financially support the family (Woodland, 2008).

Finally, due to lack of quality health care many African American males experience emotional and psychological stress that contribute to poor academic achievement (Kincaid, Jones, Cuellar & Gonzalez, 2011; Sterrett, Jones & Kincaid, 2009; Woodland, 2008). These students are unable to receive health services or health services are
compromised which compromises the students’ physical health. This leads to more days missed from school and reduced mental functioning due to physical illness and emotional stress experienced by the student leading to greater academic failure (Woodland, 2008).

**Need for the Study**

These challenges experienced in their various systems either create great resilience or create anger and resentment leading to counter culture behaviors, rejecting education as a pathway that will create opportunity and financial stability. It is imperative to foster awareness and critical consciousness understanding how these systems can lead African American males toward failure. Understanding how these systems can impact mental health, identity development and influence African American males to reject the educational pipeline can inform researchers of the current dilemma experienced in education for minorities. Through understanding of the phenomena, researchers can begin creating interventions and strength based support to improve retention and graduation rates for minority males.

There are some African American males that are advancing and graduating from universities and college. The purpose of this research was to begin exploring the strengths that African American males possess. It is important to begin moving away from a deficit model to create a strengths based model that encourages engagement in academics. The researcher was interested in investigating, through a systemic lens, where these young men are influenced and encouraged to succeed in a white dominated educational system.

Numerous studies reviewed work from a deficit model to identify problems experienced by African American males in education. Little research has been
conducted at this time that work from a strengths-based model to identify success factors that contribute to academic achievement for African American males. This study contributes to the field by establishing a study that shifts the focus from failures experienced from African American males in education toward understanding their strengths and successes. It identified how African American males from single parent families are advancing in education. This study identified what factors are working for African American male students in education. The study also identified community, familial and personal strengths and offer suggestions toward development of needed community programs and family awareness to promote academic success in at risk settings.

**Research Questions**

The following four questions guided the study:

1. What is the lived experience of African American males in education?

2. What are the factors for African American males based on their lived experience within their various operating systems (school, community, family) that contribute to their success?

3. What are the struggles for African American males based on their lived experience within their various operating systems (school, community, family) that contributes to their success?

4. Where do African American males receive positive messages and encouragement that influence their engagement in education and academic success, specifically from a systems perspective?

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this investigation was to understand where positive messages are received in African American males lived systems and how these messages contribute to academic success and advancement in higher education. The investigator proposed
key factors that promote academic engagement and achievement for African American males interviewed.

**Goal 1**

To identify positive messages received in African American males lived systems that promote academic success.

**Goal 2**

To understand success factors from student's lived experiences to make interpretations of what contributes to academic success.

**Goal 3**

To suggest a set of core components that promote academic engagement, opportunity and achievement for at risk African American adolescent males.

In addition to the aforementioned goals, the following objectives were exposed:

1. To give voice to real-life experiences of African American male adolescents who are academically successful, illustrating their accomplishments in education while enduring numerous struggles and hardships based on the oppressive system they experience.

2. To expose the value of understanding and exposing racial identity development in preparing young men for adulthood.

3. To share the value of strong positive male role models in the community and their impact in the lives of young men who struggle and are at risk of adjudication and academic failure.

4. To assist policy makers and educators by increasing awareness of existing programs that contributes to the success of African American youth.

5. To aid in the understanding and instill hope on how to promote academic success for African American adolescent males and improve graduation rates nationally.

6. To foster research ideas for future studies on fostering academic and career outcomes for African American males.
Rationale for Methodology

Phenomenology in social sciences is the study of lived experiences of subjects and their meanings; it attempts to understand and interpret these meanings with a degree of depth and richness (Van Manen, 1990). According to Husserl, (1931) phenomenology is a lived experience and meaning is created in the moment, in the experience between researcher and subject (Crotty, 1998; Flood, 2010, Husserl, 1964; Tan, Wilson & Olver, 2009). The researcher experiences the subject and phenomena in the moment while making sure to leave all previous knowledge, judgment, and bias out of the investigation (Crotty, 1998; Flood, 2010, Husserl, 1964; Tan, et al., 2009). This methodology was chosen because it allows the researcher to explore the phenomena deeply and broadly exposing strengths and struggles specifically from the subjects lived experience. Inductive analysis was paired with phenomenology to give voice to subjects interviewed based on their shared experience.

Inductive analysis operates by focusing on specific data from interviews conducted, then moves to the general (Hatch, 2002). Understanding the specific elements of each transcription from the data collected generates meaning units from the data. The researcher worked making connections of these meaning units among the transcriptions as a whole. “Inductive data analysis is a search for patterns of meaning in data so that general statements about phenomena under investigation can be made” (Hatch, p.161, 2002). By looking at the patterns across the data the researcher worked to establish a status of general explanatory statements (Hatch, 2002). Using inductive analysis enabled the researcher to identify specific areas within the subjects systems that are contributing to academic success.
Organization of the Rest of the Study

The rest of the study is contained in the next four chapters. Chapter 2 presents the review of literature that relates to factors that contribute to African American academic failure and success from a systemic overview. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology that was used in the study, which explains the research design, procedures, population, data collection method and analysis procedures. Chapter 4 contains the results of the study as interpreted by inductive analysis. Chapter 5 includes the discussion, interpretation of findings, limitations of the study, and recommendations for further research and conclusion.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

The purpose of this investigation was to understand where positive messages are received in African American males’ lived systems and how these messages contribute to academic success and advancement in higher education. The study attempted to identify a set of core components that promote academic engagement, opportunity and success in school for at-risk African American adolescent males interviewed. The investigator will discuss key factors that promote academic engagement and success as experienced by African American males interviewed. This study identified the value of strong positive role models in the community and their impact in the lives of young men who struggle and are at-risk of adjudication and academic failure. By sharing the lived experiences of at-risk academically successful African American males, this study highlights important factors that encourage academic success for African American adolescent males in efforts to improve graduation rates nationally.

Chapter 2 will be a review of literature that addresses factors that contribute to the failure of African American males in secondary education. It highlights the most salient variables and explains the current dilemma that African American males are faced with in public education. It also highlights variables that empower and promote success for these young men. It explains the researcher’s theoretical framework in addition to examining macro systems that influence academic achievement for minorities. Chapter 2 discusses the many barriers that African American males experience in daily life and how these barriers can influence academic achievement and failure. Negative and
positive experiences will be explained using an ecological systems perspective to determine salient factors that may inhibit success in schools for African American males. Strength based interventions will also be covered to explain achievement experienced by some African American males in America. The purpose of Chapter 2 is to give background of current research, and literature of African American male educational achievement to inform the reader of what is known about the topic. Additionally, Chapter 2 highlights research that demonstrates successful interventions that improve achievement for these young men.

Latino males are at the greatest risk of not completing high school with African American males following close behind Latino males based on national data provided by the National Center for Educational Statistics (2011). In 2008, when comparing all races from the ages of sixteen to twenty-four, Latino males had the highest high school dropout rate at 19.9% with African American males following at 8.7% nationally (NCES, 2011). There is an 11.2% discrepancy between the two races which makes it seem the greatest at risk population is Latino males.

However, it is important to note that over the course of the last ten years the Latino population in the United States has grown exponentially with a 43% increase compared to 12.3% for African Americans in total population (U.S. Census, 2010). Based on this growth over the last ten years Latinos constitute 16.3% of the total population in the United States, whereas African Americans comprise 12.6% (U.S. Census, 2010). Ten years ago these two ethnicities were within three tenths of a point from one another. Latino population nationally outnumbers African American as the largest represented minority in America. These statistics provide an argument that Latino males do
represent the largest male population to dropout out of high school, but are they the most at risk male population?

When discussing at risk populations it is also important to mention current incarceration rates nationally with respect to race. The last released U.S. Census data set on prison and jail inmates from the Bureau of Justice Statistics was released in 2006. It was estimated by the Bureau of Justice that 12% of black males, 3.7% of Hispanic males and 1.7% of white males in their late twenties were in prison or jail (BJS, 2010). Additionally, it was reported that 44.3% of the total population of county and city jail inmates nationally was made up of Caucasian; 38.9% African Americans; 15% Latino; and 1.7% considered other (BJS, 2010). In fact, many have proposed that African American adolescent males are the greatest identified population for failure upon entering young adulthood (Colin, 2003; Poe, 2004; Pollack 2006).

Interpreting the aforementioned data, Latino males may indeed be the largest population in crisis in our educational system in terms of dropping out from high school. African American males are at greatest risk of incarceration based on national data. Combining dropout rates for African American males along with young African American male incarceration rates one can postulate that African American males are at greatest risk of all males in America (Colin, 2003; Poe, 2004). Combining these two variables, dropout and incarceration rates, calls for investigation of the educational system, as well as community measures being taken to empower these youth. In other words, as researchers after identifying their barriers toward achieving in public school what interventions have been created to facilitate success outcomes in education? African American males are in crisis in America with regards to post secondary opportunity and
positive outcomes based on current statistics from NCES (2011). Are educators and community stakeholders creating preventive measures as well as interventions to begin improving opportunities for urban African American males and reduce incarceration rates?

**Theoretical Framework**

**Black Racial Identity Theory**

Appropriate racial identity development is critical for minorities during adolescence to develop healthy mental functioning, confidence, esteem and self affirmation (Warikoo & Carter, 2009). School models are often based on cultural and academic stratification which impose privilege and class inequality in the classroom as it is experienced in society (Bourdieu & Patterson, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Wakirroo & Carter, 2009). This creates fictive kinship characteristics for African American males perpetuating the pattern and cycle of academic failure for this group (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Howard-Hamilton & Behar-Horenstein, 1995). This behavior of fictive kinship is often blamed on rebellion, poverty, single parent mothers, low teacher quality and drug affiliation (Warikoo & Carter, 2009). To the contrary research is combating this social myth, positioning a stronger argument that race, ethnicity and the cultural ethos of the school either encourage or discourage academic engagement of youth (Farkas, Grobe, Sheehan & Shuan, 1990; Warikoo & Carter, 2009). Farkas, et al., (2009) argue that teachers need to reject the traditional approach of the “middle class hegemony” that often reject minority group, but especially low income students which creates a self fulfilling prophecy for these students. Farkas, et al. (2009) calls attention to researchers to develop a stronger multicultural approach to working with all students despite ethnicity. Farkas, et al., (2009) suggests that by establishing equal opportunities for all
in education, the effects of oppression experienced in schools for minorities by the majority group is reduced and better academic outcomes can be achieved for minority groups.

When individuals from minority ethnicities are not equally acknowledged, accepted, and embraced by the majority, these individuals may commonly experience discrimination and oppression. Some educators may hold implicit prejudice toward minority students, thus perpetuating the ethnic achievement gap due to unknown or unaware prejudice (van den Bergh et al., 2010). Many educators, especially if they are from the majority race, often are not aware of their own privilege (van den Bergh, et al., 2010). This can pose a problem as it forces minority students to assimilate to the majority culture. By assimilating, minority students disregard their culture by joining the majority culture which could create problems with cultural identity, and self esteem (van den Bergh, et al., 2010, Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). However, the reverse effect can occur for some minority students, fictive kinship, creating a lack of connection with the educator and pose negative views and attitudes toward school (van den Bergh, et al., 2010, Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, Howard-Hamilton & Behar-Horenstein, 1995).

Experiencing oppressive acts create negative experiences that impact academic engagement and achievement for African Americans (Farkas, et al., 1990, Wakiroo & Carter, 2009). An oppressive act is as an act that prevents people from being fully human (Friere, 1970). Friere (1970) explains that when someone experiences oppression they are made to feel subordinate to the oppressor creating feelings of inferiority and power differentials. It was found that implicit measures of prejudiced attitudes of teachers influenced teacher expectations and minority student achievement.
more than the teachers’ explicit measure of prejudiced attitudes (van den Bergh, et al., 2010). Appropriate cultural training for all educators is necessary to ensure they are aware of their implicit and explicit prejudices in order to enable them to create a classroom that invites and embraces students from all cultures (Boykin et al., 2006). Van den Bergh, et al., (2010) suggests that oppressive messages transmitted from teachers to African American males can be harmful in their engagement, achievement and connection to education in schools.

These prejudiced and oppressive acts experienced by African American males’ impacts their psychological and emotional development (Jenkins, 2006). Unfortunately African American males have a more difficult time creating their own sense of self due to the definitions that have been given to them by larger society (Cross, 1971; Helms, 1990; Jenkins, 2006). These definitions of what an African American male is, created by mass media, prejudice, discrimination and majority view, further disseminate stereotypical perspectives thus marginalizing this population (Jenkins, 2006). African American males become confused when developing their own identity during adolescence. These males struggle with their own identity. African American males struggle with identity issues such as whether to fulfill the expectation set by society to become gangsters, and drug dealers or to engage in their academics and step outside of what society has viewed as a typical role for black males (Jenkins, 2006).

Adolescence is a critical time for either educational achievement or failure for Black males (Chavous, et al., 2003; Floyd, 2010; Graham & Anderson, 2008). Graham and Anderson (2008) discuss the importance of racial identity development and embracing “Blackness” for African American gifted students in relation to their academic
success. Many African American students that are successful in school are often categorized by their peers as “acting white” (Graham & Anderson, 2008). For many African American students this creates psychological distress (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Graham & Anderson, 2008; Howard-Hamilton & Behar-Horenstein, 1995). By embracing “Blackness” and understanding and accepting their cultural heritage Black males improve self esteem, work ethic, confidence and are able to be oneself in school in the face of social pressure and criticism (Graham & Anderson, 2008). Racial identity development theory helps educators know where to start with Black males to begin promoting academic success.

A racial identity development model provides a process for African Americans to abandon internalized racism experienced from daily living and interactions with the majority and develop a positive self concept of their racial identity and group expression (Sue, et al., 1998). Being able to free oneself of internalized racism improves self efficacy, esteem, and confidence which enable African Americans to move toward experiencing greater opportunities in their life (Coard, et al., 2001). Freeing oneself of internalized racism creates an opportunity for individuals to respond differently to their socio-cultural environments and maintain greater psychological well being and interaction (Coard, et al., 2001). William Cross (1971) is credited with developing the black racial identity model (Sue, et al., 1998). Janet Helms has expanded on Cross’s model adapting his work relating it to psychological states, mental health and counseling related issues (Sue, et al., 1998). Cross’ stages of identity development are outlined below.
Cross’s racial identity development model. Cross’s racial identity development model consist of four stages (Cross, 1971). These stages are linear and include Pre-encounter, Encounter, Immersion/Emersion, and Internalization. These stages have been revised twice over the course of the last forty years with revisions occurring in 1991 and again in 2000 (Worrell, Cross, Jr., & Vandiver, 2001). The original model was developed by William Cross in 1971.

Pre-encounter is the first stage of the Black racial identity development. During the Pre-Encounter stage of Black racial identity development model African Americans experience assimilation, wanting to “be White” and self hatred in their lives (Worrell, et al., 2001). During Pre-Encounter African Americans are dominated by White culture, wanting to be like the majority thus denigrating their own culture and values (Sue, et al., 1998). During this stage African American males are more likely to assimilate to the dominant culture and often think about wanting to be white or even “Acting White” to fit in at their schools.

Encounter is the next stage of this model. During the Encounter stage African Americans begin to question their previously held beliefs and their past desires to assimilate to the majority culture (Sue, et al., 1998). Often during this stage individuals experience an explicit act of prejudice, racism or discrimination which makes them question their past beliefs (Worrell, et al., 2001). During this time the individual begins to align within their own ethnicity.

Next is the Immersion/Emersion stage where African Americans rejects all values that are not from their own culture (Sue, et al., 1998). During this stage individuals immerse themselves into Black culture and often reject the dominant culture. They
begin to embrace and create a sense of their place in this world, and the development of their culture over the years (Vandiver, Fhagen-Smith, Cokley, Cross, Jr., & Worrell, 2001). Rage, anxiety, and guilt, emotions that are potentially destructive when uncontrolled, fuel these explorations of Blackness (Vandiver, et al., 2001).

Internalization is the final stage of the Cross model. During the Internalization stage, African Americans gain acceptance of their identity, become self confident and affirmed as an African American within society, and are also comfortable and accepting of non Black worldviews (Sue, et al., 1998). However, it is important to note that during the 2000 expanded revision this stage changed in that internalized Blacks could differ in their acceptance of individuals from diverse groups (Vandiver, et al., 2001). Vandiver, et al., (2001) state that reaching the Internalization stage does not free African Americans from mental health, rather it frees individuals to concentrate on issues beyond the parameters of racism, oppression and Blackness. Helms (1995) adapted Cross’s work adding mental health and psychological components at the internalized stage and argues that by reaching a positive racial self conception, gains in esteem, confidence and mental health functioning do occur. When African American males can concentrate on issues beyond racism, oppression, and blackness, space becomes available along with esteem and confidence to focus on academics and career paths.

**Ecological Systems Theory**

The ecological systems model attends to relational, contextual and situational factors identified within an individual through understanding the various macro, meso and micro systems that comprise the individual’s existence (Pierson, et al., 2011). Ecological systems theory was created by psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) posits that human development was shaped and created by various encounters an
individual experiences within their existence. Bronfenbrenner (1979) explains that each encounter and ecological environment an individual interacts with helps shape and creates their meaning as well as development towards adulthood. Thus, every environment whether at school, in the community, extended family, nuclear family or within self has impact on the development of that individual. Leonard (2011) furthers this argument stating that high school students who are developing properly can successfully navigate their lived systems, which will be reflected in good grades and achievement. Leonard (2011) argues that by using an ecological systems theory with at risk populations educators are able to look at the problem from a holistic view and identify specific systems that need remediation.

Ecological systems theory investigates the interplay of macro, meso and micro levels of individuals. These levels vary in their complexity and interaction ranging from social, political and economic forces (macro); to community, school, town (meso); to (micro) which is where the individual interacts in day to day, face to face experiences (Pierson, 2011). Through this perspective individual, social and system experiences interact and influence one another either for the benefit or detriment of the identified individual (Pierson, 2011). It is important to understand how the individual makes meaning of their lived experience, while at the same time investigating social environments and systems experienced within the individual’s world observing the interdependence and influence of the systems (Kelly, 2010). This helps counselors experience the whole individual and understand the individuals’ strength and support, as well as where negative messages are transmitted that create distress and possible poor academic achievement (Leonard, 2011). Kelly (2010) furthers Leonard’s statement
suggesting that by understanding the culture of a community one can create methods that are congruent with that culture to improve achievement in schools and life in the community.

The ecological systems model investigates the various level systems and how the systems are intra and interdependent of one another. As stated before there are three main levels that are used by researchers and counselors when operating in an ecological systems theory. These three levels are macrosystem, mesosystem and microsystem.

Macrosystem is defined as the largest system and is the dominating cultural, social, political and economic states within society (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Leonard, 2011; Pierson, 2011). The macrosystem consists of an outer circle of people and messages created from society that impact the development and experience of the individual, but the individual never experiences intimately.

The mesosystem is considered the bridge between the individual’s more intimate world and the systems experienced outside of their home. The mesosystem is comprised of the city or town, community, school, peers, work setting and church where the individual lives and operates (Bronfenbenner, 1979). Investigators at the mesosystemic level are investigating the interactions between the systems to gain insight to the synergy the systems jointly have on the individual. Where does the individual gain confidence, esteem or motivation? Where does the individual struggle, experience hopelessness, disengagement, or failure? The purpose of investigating systems is to identify strengths or positive experiences in one system and adapt these
findings to systems where the individual struggles to eradicate negative experiences, thus promoting self worth and confidence (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008).

Finally, the microsystem is defined as the interaction that the individual has with each unique system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The microsystem is the direct experience with each system the individual experiences, that is the individuals experience at school is separate from the individuals experience at church. The microsystem looks at each system individually.

**Factors that Contribute to Underachievement**

There are five main macro systems identified in this literature review that affect academic achievement for African American males. This section of Chapter 2 highlights significant factors that can contribute to academic failure for African American males. The five main macro systems that influence academic achievement and opportunity for these youth include oppression, masculinity, matriarchal family, socio-economic class, and the interaction of class, gender and race. The following section will outline by system the effects that each system plays in the academic achievement, development and opportunity of these youth.

**Oppression**

Oppression is defined as the act of treating or governing an individual in a cruel and unfair way (Oxford, 2008). Oppression takes many forms and often can be contextually situated amongst many systems (Ken, 2007). Oppression can be situated in social locations that have been influenced and created by power, persuasion, philosophies and material realities of race, class, and gender. These interactions and manipulations of systems make it hard for any individual in any given circumstance to be all oppressed or all oppressing (Ken, 2007).
Simply put oppression “unjustly denies opportunity for resilient autonomy” (Zutlevics, 2002, p. 82). Zutlevics (2002) explains that resilient autonomy is achievement through hard work, determination and will. Oppression often creates barriers that make it harder for individuals to achieve equality, and advancement from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to more stable social and economic states (Zutlevics, 2002). Additionally, oppressive acts create larger mental health problems such as depression and low self esteem for African Americans (Goodman & West-Olatunji, 2010).

African Americans historically have experienced hegemony in public school settings (Goodman & West-Olatunji, 2010). Hegemony is defined as the dominance of one social group or country over others (Oxford, 2008). African Americans have experienced segregation, lived through integration while enduring hate crimes, racism, prejudice, and discrimination during the 1960s and today experience various levels of implicit and explicit racism and oppression at school (Howard-Hamilton & Behar-Horenstein, 1995; Joe & Davis, 2009; Lewin, 2006; van den Bergh, et al., 2010). Oppression creates a self fulfilling prophecy for African American males as they begin to believe that there is no point in trying to achieve because even with their best effort in school it will not produce the same opportunities as their white majority counterparts (Harper, 2007; Taylor, et al., 1994).

Mahalik et al. (2006) explains that African Americans that accept their oppressed role and are unable to develop their own racial identity outside of the majority will experience greater levels of psychological distress. Though in one sense rejecting the majority is positive because it creates a certain level of empowerment by defying the
majority rule it does creates gaps and limits opportunities for African Americans in education (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Harper, 2007).

Fictive kinship therefore carries many implications for young African American males. First, by African Americans rejecting White middle class education these young men fail academically and are more susceptible to street life and crime (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Howard-Hamilton & Behar-Horenstein, 1995; Jordan, 2005; McMillian, 2003). Second, by rejecting the dominant culture which drives educational standards many African American males turn to drug and gang related culture which leads to dropout and greater risk of incarceration (Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Noguera, 2005). Educators must understand these concepts and help young African American men foster resiliency which focuses on strengths of the individual to overcome barriers in education and oppression that is transmitted from the dominant culture (Goodman & West-Olatunji, 2010).

Perceptions of Masculinity

Masculinity is another macro level system that influences achievement and engagement for males in education. Traditional views of masculinity dissuade academic engagement for boys (Juelskjaer, 2008). In order to abide by the code outlined by masculine hegemony boys receive messages to reject any characteristic of being successful in academics as it is perceived as feminine (Juelskjaer, 2008). Masculine culture rejects boys that work hard and achieve in school, terming these boys as nerds, (Kehily & Nayak, 1997). Kehily and Nayak (1997) suggest that humor is the organizing principle used at school for boys as it relates to masculinity. Martino (2000) expands their research suggesting that humor structures how boys relate; it creates a system of verbal abuse that establishes a hierarchy of masculinities. Boys fall on a spectrum of
masculinity which determines their level of acceptance and “coolness” in school based on their ability to challenge, name call and joke with each other (Martino, 2000). Boys that are not as verbal, athletic or are more interested in academics become subjects of ridicule based on this system (Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Martino, 2000). This verbal abuse or bantering back and forth between boys are deemed rituals of abuse in masculinity culture which is a measurement of evaluating male prowess between each other (Kehily & Nayak, 1997).

This aforementioned description of masculinity hegemony is problematic for academic achievement and advancement for boys. If boys do not subscribe to masculine hegemony these boys are susceptible to ridicule, rejection from the group and experience greater levels of psychological distress (Pollack, 1999, 2006). Outwardly toward their peer group boys are influenced through masculine culture to reject school, though internally many understand the importance of school and lost opportunity if they fail academically (Jackson & Dempster, 2009). Therefore an internal struggle arises and boys must often hide their own intellect or compensate by becoming an athlete, musician, or class clown to retain masculine status within the hierarchy (Jackson & Dempster, 2009; Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Martino, 2000). This can create greater levels of stress experienced by the young man, as well as, increase vulnerability to psychological distress or impairment (Simons, et al., 1999).

Boys are conditioned by fathers, uncles, media, tradition, family and community to possess characteristics as what is defined as masculine (Farrell, 1974; Hooks, 2004; Pollack, 2006). Boy code is defined as a set of cultural norms, the messages boys hear across the about what it means to be a boy in today’s society (Pollack, 1999). Jackson
and Dempster (2009) further delineate masculinity by providing a set of three rules. These rules suggest that in order to be masculine one must (a) reject all characteristics of the feminine, (b) the relentless focus to be powerful and successful and (c) being bold, aggressive and exhibiting no fear.

Messages about being masculine are transmitted from our society through multiple mediums teaching young boys to be tough, concealing empathy, natural love and ultimately to hide all pain (Pollack, 2006). These messages are transmitted in clichés such as “Stand on your own two feet,” “Be a man,” “Big boys don’t cry,” “Stop acting girly” expressed by fathers, community members and the media. These messages teach these young men to suppress feeling emotions, especially those that are considered feminine (Pollack, 2006). Social control, especially in the form of guilt, suppresses these young boys’ emotional voices which can lead to mental health concerns, lowered self esteem and confidence (Frank, Kehler, Lovell, & Davison, 2003; Jackson & Dempster, 2009; Pollack, 2006). In this patriarchal culture young males are not allowed to be acknowledged for their individuality and uniqueness, rather their value is dictated by their performance and what they are able to achieve (Hooks, 2004).

Masculinity exchanges self esteem for bravado (Pollack, 1999, 2006). To maintain homeostasis within masculinity most boys conceal their emotions such as sadness, hurt, not loved, wounded, and criticized (Farrell, 1974, Hooks, 2004, Levant, 2001, Pollack, 1999, 2006). These suppressed feelings reformulate into anger and manifest as aggressive behaviors. Pollack (1999, 2006) states these actions fulfill the expectations of the boy code. However, un-dealt emotions such as sadness, hurt, wounded, and not loved can lead to identity confusion, arrested states of identity
development, and possible mental health concerns (Pollack, 2006). Pollack (1999, 2006) and Hooks (2004) argue that by not acknowledging negative emotions and working to understand suppressed emotions such as hurt and humiliation these young men are at greater risk for depression, anxiety disorders and academic underachievement.

Masculinity can also create symptom related to male underachievement which is described as effortless achievement. Effortless achievement builds on Pollack’s work, which argues that due to boy code and masculinity boys replace their self esteem with bravado externally or for the world to see (Jackson & Dempster, 2009; Frank, et al., 2003; Martino, 2000; Pollack, 2006). Effortless achievement occurs when boys outwardly denounce education and work to their friends to appear cool. However, behind closed doors they work diligently to perform the task so they can achieve in school (Jackson & Dempster, 2009). If these students do fail by chance they tell their peers groups that it was not due to lack of ability, rather the lack of effort that they put into the assignment. Contrastingly, if these boys do exceptionally well they present their achievement as effortless achievement, which is associated with high intellectual ability (Jackson and Dempster, 2006).

Effortless achievement creates another emotional rollercoaster for young men in constructing their identity (Jackson & Dempster, 2009; Frank, et al., 2003; Martino, 2000). Young men’s inner voices often will become overwhelmed when trying to balance self worth against being cool or masculine with respect to academic achievement (Jackson & Dempster, 2009; Juelskjaer, 2008; Martino, 2000). Doing well in school is seen as nerdy and overly feminine which can lead to peer ridicule (Jackson
& Dempster, 2009, Martino, 2000, Pollack 1999, 2006). Self worth is defined by one’s own sensitivity of one’s ability, which is associated with successful achievement (Simons, et al., 1999). Success in academics is objective and quantified through grades in courses. Thus, success in academic achievement can be suggested to be linked to self worth (Simons, et al., 1999). Due traditional views of masculinity in American society many boys struggle emotionally when working to maintain an external image with their peer group and internal view of their self worth as well as success in school (Jackson & Dempster, 2009). This double bind can increase levels of anxiety and influence academic ability and achievement.

“If we cannot heal what we cannot feel, by supporting patriarchal culture that socializes men to deny feelings, we doom them to live in states of emotional numbness,” (Hooks, 2004, p. 6). Hooks calls for a critical consciousness that examines the deconstruction of traditional patriarchal practices and teaching. Young males need to be able to express their emotions without being ridiculed or considered too feminine (Farrell, 1974; Hooks, 2004; Pollack, 1999). Jackson and Dempster (2009) suggest considering re-evaluating how educators measure success by shifting some of the focus away from product and more on praising the effort and process. Redefining these gender roles to create a safe place academically for boys to engage academically will be difficult due to traditional definitions of masculinity and femininity. Space can be created for boys to free themselves from the chains of masculinity. Overcoming traditional views of masculinity can be achieved through educating parents and teachers whom can construct new communicative patterns and a community that is egalitarian, creating space for emotional growth and education (Pollack, 2006).
Single Parent System

Many African American families over the course of American history have been out of wedlock and female centered (Battle & Scott, 2000). Since the 1960s African American single parent households has risen to 63 percent, with 92 percent of these families headed by mothers (Battle & Scott, 2000; Hill, 1999). There has been a considerable amount of research conducted on the effects of not having a father figure present and the effects of educational achievement, crime, gang membership, premarital sex, to homosexuality (Battle & Scott, 2000; Du Plessis, 1993; Young, Jensen, Olsen & Cundick, 1991; Paschall, et al., 2003; Peoples & Loeber, 1994). Battle and Scott’s (2000) findings suggest that female households that are capable of raising children in a single parent household, academic achievement and healthy development has more to do with availability/accessibility and possession of economic resources than gender or a nuclear family. The single parent mothers need support from extended family and community members which will promote successful child rearing (Battle & Scott, 2000; Murry, et al., 2001).

African American males that do not have a positive male role model in their lives have difficulty developing their racial identity, which leads to confusion in their identity resulting in lowered self esteem, confidence in school, more apt to join gangs to find belonging which all influence achievement in schools (Mahalik, et al., 2006; Parker & Maggard, 2009; Sterrett, et al., 2009). Identification with a positive African American male role model for adolescent African American males allows space for racial identity development which improves the adolescents’ mental health, increasing self esteem and decreasing psychological distress (Mahalik, et al., 2006).
Single parent mothers typically experience greater economic, work-related and family related distress than traditional nuclear families (Murry, et al., 2001). Many single parent mothers experience the pressure of providing financially sometimes working two shifts to provide for their children. Single mothers often feel over worked and inadequate in providing basic needs to their children that can lead to psychological distress for these mothers (Murry et al., 2001). This stress experienced by mothers, if not managed, leads to diminished mental functioning and can create psychological disorders such as anxiety, depression and substance abuse (Brody & Flor, 1998; Ceballo & Borquez, 1994; Jayarante; Murry, et al., 2001).

Two factors that contribute to poor mental health and functioning are educational and financial resources (Ensiminger, 1995). Ensiminger (1995) found that educated mothers possessed greater capacity to manage stressful times and generally were able to manage finances better with better paying jobs and budgeting. Ensiminger’s (1995) finding suggests the importance of extended family and community support for lower socio-economic mothers in raising their families to provide social support which will promote academic achievement for youth. Thus, Extended families and community support are imperative in promoting academic engagement and success for African American males based on Ensiminger’s findings.

Distress is experienced at greater levels in families that are reared by single parent mothers (Dorsey, et al., 2007). This distress is experienced typically when mothers have limited postsecondary education, experience co-parenting conflict (with absent father, ie. child support), often lack interpersonal and parenting skills (Dorsey et al., 2007). Parenting skills are linked with maternal self esteem which often influences
the bond between mother and child (Murry, et al. 2001). Many African American single parent mothers work in jobs that create both financial and health related stressors due to poor pay and less than adequate health care (Goodman, Slap & Huang, 2003). Financial and health related distress trickle down within the family system and influence African American males’ academic pathways, opportunities, physical and psychological well being (Goodman et al, 2003).

For many mothers, working two jobs is a reality which creates long hours and often compromises parenting, supervision, and availability for them to help their children with school (Mahlik, et al., 2006; Murry, et al., 2001; Paschall, et al., 2003). Being unavailable in the afternoons for their children due to work can create mental health issues for mothers especially when they compare themselves to other mothers in the community that may be financially stable and are supported by a partner (McLoyd, et al., 2004). These identified stressors have impact on the single parent African American mothers self worth (Murry, et al., 2001). Adolescents from single parent maternal homes when the mother is impaired experience diminished self-esteem, guilt, and may reject white middle class education because these youth feel an obligation to help provide for the family (Noguera, 2003; Paschall, et al., 2003). Additionally, when providing basic needs for the family (food, shelter, safety) are in question education often is not as valued or important. All of these factors influence academic engagement, achievement and future opportunities.

Often adolescent African American males will seek support from their peers when the mother is unavailable (Chester, Jones, Zalot & Sterrett, 2007). These youth identify their mother is busy working and turn to establishing friendships in the community to
manage their own social needs and support (Chester, et al., 2007). The problem that arises for lower SES African American males is the community they live in and their choices of friends and groups to join (Chester, et al., 2007; Quanes & Rankin, 1998). African American males living for a sustained period of time in an economically stressed community, predicted association with antisocial peers who dismissed academics and the importance of achieving in school (Quanes & Rankin, 1998). Young Black males that live in lower socio economic communities therefore are at greater risk of academic underachievement and opportunity due to limited interaction with their primary caregiver and the influence of negative peer groups in their community (Chester, et al., 2007; Quanes & Rankin, 1998). Again extended family and healthy supportive community support appear to be important in fostering success for these young men.

Chester, et al., (2007) found that single parent homes with high levels of positive parenting skills fostered greater trust, security, self worth and self reliance for their children and adolescents. Families that use positive parenting skills create healthy psychosocial development that may aid in character development and decision making when finding and joining peer groups for young Black males (Chester, et al., 2007; Sheely & Bratton, 2010). Chester, et al., (2007) findings suggest by developing a positive and strong relationship with an adolescent that these youth based on their psychosocial ability will seek out more positive friendships. Being able to develop healthy and positive relationships with their peers may increase their social support and belonging in turn decreasing their vulnerability toward aggressive and delinquent behaviors along with depression (Chester, et al., 2007). Therefore when examining factors that contribute to African American male academic success or failure it is
important to understand the family system, its interaction and what messages are transmitted from the home.

**Socio-Economic Status**

Another barrier experienced by African American male boys when trying to succeed academically is their socio economic status. Most Black males are raised in matriarchal single parent families, placing these youth in a low socioeconomic status (Rodney & Mupier, 1999). There are many barriers presented for youth being raised and educated in a middle-lower and low socioeconomic background (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2010; Goodman, et al., 2003; Rodney & Mupier, 1999). These youth often experience less supervised time after school, exposure to drug and gang culture, crime and lack of access to quality health care (Currie, 2005; Noguera, 2005; Parker & Maggard, 2009).

Great disparities in health care access such as services and treatment exist for African American males when compared to their White middle class counterparts. These disparities influence academic availability and ultimately achievement due to being chronically physically ill (Currie, 2005). Poorer health care leads to more days of school missed, reduced mental functioning that increases the probability of mental health problems and greater levels of distress in their life when compared to children who have adequate health care plans (Currie, 2005).

Children who are reared in single parent families that are poor and live in high poverty communities are less ready to learn upon entering school (Milne & Plourde, 2006; Vail, 2004). Typically these students lag behind more privileged classmates in language development and problem solving ability in the classroom (Vail, 2004). Nutrition is also a factor that affects children that come from lower socioeconomic
backgrounds. Poor nutrition is associated with obesity and greater health risks and illness (Goodman, et al., 2003). In addition to these findings Vail (2004) argues that by not being able to provide an adequate breakfast due to poverty, students experience difficulty in paying attention which will impact their academic success. Poverty and inadequate health care suggest that SES affect students’ well being, cognitive development and academic achievement (Milne & Plourde, 2006).

Additionally, these young black males, often identify as “the man of the house”, feeling obligated to help financially provide for the family. The pressure and guilt associated with helping in providing for the family often leads to dealing drugs and other forms of criminal activity that produces income for the family (Parker & Maggard 2009). Young black males engaging in illegal activities to provide financially for the family increase the likelihood of dropout and incarceration, limiting positive outcomes for these young men (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2010; Parker & Maggard, 2009; Woodland, 2008).

African American males are at a double disadvantage being a minority and coming from a low SES background (Espinosa, 2005). Oppression is visible again as these young men enter public education and must adapt to a set of white middle class rules. Kupchick and Ellis (2008) defend reproduction theory in their research and claim that public schools are shaped by the needs of the capitalist marketplace. This theory holds that schools recreate class and inequality that currently exist in society (Kupchick & Ellis, 2008). African American males must learn how to abide by a new set of rules at school that do not exist within their community or home. This may create frustration and require training for students learning to navigate an unknown terrain with different rules.
Learning this new set of rules can create weariness of the school system as well as eventual defiance as students feel that they are being treated unfairly when compared to their white counterparts (Kupchick & Ellis, 2008). Racial minorities therefore may find themselves alienated or rejected by the schools as they deem their discipline and treatment from authority figures unjust and unfair compared to White students (Townsend, 2000).

This further perpetuates the academic disengagement and dropout rates for African American males. Due to their perceived inferiority African American males experience a sense of rejection, and feel targeted by administrators again assuming the role of fictive kinship to feel adequate (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Howard-Hamilton & Behar-Horenstein, 1995; Kupchick & Ellis, 2008). Teachers and administrators need to be aware of this cultural difference and develop school rules that encompass all economic, linguistic and culturally diverse backgrounds to promote belonging and engagement of all students within the school (Epinosa, 2005).

**Interaction of Race, Class and Gender**

Race, class, and gender are the basic categories for social organization (Battle & Scott, 2000). It is important to understand the interactions of gender with both culture and social structure when working with families of color. The interlocking of these systems: gender, class and race, create oppression and resistance for families of color (Battle & Scott, 2000; Bien & Tienda, 1987). Each system can by itself create inequality for African American males, and when all three systems interact negatively, the outcome of the interaction can create large gaps in opportunity for these young men (Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999). Availability of educational resources that are culturally sensitive have influence on African Americans educational achievement and
opportunity (Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999). When low SES African American males are raised by single parent mothers, they are more likely to struggle in school (Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999). When teachers dismiss culturally responsive instruction and positive interactions with African American males they are more likely to disengage in academics and drop out of school (Wyatt, 2009).

Trusty, Ng, and Plata (2000) found a significant three way interaction between gender, SES and ethnicity, when investigating post secondary educational choices for U.S. students. The interaction of ethnicity and SES along with gender and ethnicity were significant in predicting postsecondary career paths for African American men (Trusty, Ng, & Plata 2000). African American men from lower SES backgrounds were less likely to have awareness of career choices and opportunity outside of their own lived experience within their community (Trusty, et al., 2000). African American men from middle to upper class backgrounds were knowledgeable about various career paths and varied greatly in their career choices (Trusty, et al., 2000). SES and ethnicity play a major role in academic outcome and career path for young African American men.

Trusty et al. (2000) research suggests that many minority students come from lower SES backgrounds can achieve, yet often are not sure what career path to choose and fall back to familiar careers experienced in their community or family. The researchers suggest the importance for counselors to understand the interaction that SES, gender and ethnicity play in shaping African American boys and girls toward careers. Counselors need to be knowledgeable and understand the interaction of SES, gender and ethnicity and their influence with each individual minority student to match ability,
personality type and achievement in school with careers and majors (Trusty, et al., 2000).

**Promoting Success**

There is a field of researchers that have begun identifying factors that do promote success for young African American men in education. Parental involvement, afterschool programs, mentoring, teacher student relationships and family community support have been found to promote success and opportunity for African American males. The following section describes studies that have been conducted that have identified factors that empower and promotes academic success for African American males.

**Parental Involvement**

Parental involvement is a key issue when discussing low income African American families and the students’ academic success (Sheely & Bratton, 2010). Lack of parental involvement in the lives of African American students can lead to behavior problems in school as well as increased stress in the family. This lack of involvement often influences the students’ ability to perform in the classroom and complete work at home (Sheely & Bratton, 2010). Along with lack of academic support, social emotional development suffers due to lack of involvement of parents. Early in the stages of development if attachment and appropriate social and emotional needs are not fostered in the home, deficits in development may occur with that child that will greatly impact achievement in schools (Aviles, Anderson & Davila, 2006). Children that come from a neglected home often suffer from intellectual, cognitive and academic impairments, (Aviles, et al., 2006). When speaking specifically about male underachievement poor social and emotional development will lead to failure in school.
Sheely & Bratton (2010) found that the implementation of child parent relationship training was significant in improving the students’ behavior in school as well as the relationship in the home with the family. A significant finding in this study is the use of strength based counseling interventions to reduce behavior problems during the school day, as well as reduced levels of stress in the home. One can postulate that by reducing acting out behaviors during the school day the student is more likely to engage in learning thus improving achievement. Additionally, through this family training program the child is more apt to receive the appropriate nurturing and support at home to academically achieve (Sheely & Bratton, 2010).

Smith (2009) works to dispel the myth that African American parents that come from low SES are not engaged in their students’ academic success. He argues instead that these parents are quite engaged in academic success, but use a different medium to relay their message than middle and upper class White parents. Smith (2009) explains that many parents that are from lower SES backgrounds often work two jobs or have night shifts that do not enable them to participate in parent teacher conferences or school functions. African American parents from low SES backgrounds motivate their children through their own narrative of academic success and failure (Smith, 2009). This narrative is infused with a culturally informed perspective that works to influence their children to complete high school (Smith, 2009). These parents want their students to succeed in school. Smith’s study actually dispels the myths of lack of parental involvement with qualitative findings that tell stories of how parents from lower SES backgrounds actually want their children to do better than them in their academic careers.
Smith suggests that as counselors and educators we need to become advocates for these families. Most of these families’ parents have never completed high school or just hold a high school degree. Due to limited access to college admissions, in efforts to promote postsecondary success, educators and counselors are and need to “provide maps that clearly outline pathways and steps to arrive at the destination of college admission, enrollment and graduation” (Smith, 2009, p.191). It needs to be clear that these parents do want the best for their children; they just may be limited in how to access information for their children. Counselors and educators need to become advocates and immerse themselves, working with poorer families to provide access toward greater opportunities in academics and future employment (Smith, 2009).

**Afterschool/Mentoring Programs**

Lack of positive role models and unsupervised afterschool time increases the risk of these young men being involved in crime, gangs and drug related activities (Noguera, 2005). The research of Noguera (2005) is supported by a 1980 release from the Carnegie Foundation that found the peak hours for juvenile crime were between the hours of 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.. These findings of afternoon juvenile crime led toward a movement to provide afterschool activities for these urban youth (Woodland, 2008).

Three models of afterschool programs emerged as a result of the Carnegie Foundation study and are still used nationally (Woodland, 2008). The three models include the extracurricular activities model, the mentoring model, and the ROP model. The most widely used in the United States is the extracurricular activities model (Woodland, 2008). The extracurricular model exposes students to a number of activities such as sports, arts, crafts, technology, tutoring, and supervised free play (Woodland, 2008).
The mentoring model operates similar to an extracurricular model, but places great emphasis on the adult-student relationship (Choi & Lenberger, 2010). Each student is provided a mentor that helps the student grow socially, emotionally, and academically. Research by Mitchell, Bush, and Bush (2002) provides evidence that the mentor model is effective for African American males and increases success and opportunity for these young males when these students are able to connect with their mentor. The relationship between mentor and mentee is the key for appropriate social and emotional development, as well as, academic success (Gordon, Iwamoto, Ward, Potts, & Boyd, 2009; Grossman & Belle, 2006). This model serves single parent families well because it provides the student with a responsible outlet to discuss their emotions, behavior and academics after school when often the single parent is working or overwhelmed with household duties and caring for other children (Woodland, 2008).

Finally, the ROP or rite of passage program has been designed by African American scholars and community activists of whom the primary focus is on helping students move from one stage to the next in life successfully (Gordon, et al., 2009; Woodland, 2008). The program focuses on racial identity and the development of young men. Many ROP programs use the afterschool model, yet go beyond the school week by providing activities and retreats on many Saturdays (Woodland, 2008). Activities in ROP programs include critical discussions and cultural based activities that deal with history, civil services, community outreach, lecturers from the African American community, and outdoor related activities. Students that participate in the ROP programs are assigned and elder who acts as a mentor and becomes an integral part of a boys’ life and often family. The ROP ideology consists of three tenets. The three
tenets are to provide curriculum and experiences focused around the African American youth, encourage African Americans to embrace their culture, values and ideals while establishing a racial identity, and transitioning boys’ into manhood (Gordon, et al., 2009; Graham & Andersen, 2008; Woodland, 2008).

These programs have provided a framework for aiding underprivileged students in urban and rural areas to succeed in life. Though all are effective in providing assistance to many youth, it seems that ROP programs that are infused with the extracurricular model provide the greatest opportunity for African American males (Woodard, 1995). Being comfortable with one’s racial identity is a cornerstone for increasing confidence, esteem, comfort and acceptance for all adolescents (Mahalik, et al., 2006; Parham & Helms, 1985; Smith, 2004).

African American males that are able to develop and understand their racial identity are more likely to have heightened self esteem, and confidence, and thus more likely to achieve in schools (Mahalik, et al., 2006).

“The results from the study confirmed five of the eight hypothesized relationships and suggested that both racial identity and conformity to masculine norms in the dominant culture explain unique variance in Black men’s self-esteem and psychological distress… for young black males self-esteem was positively related to participants’ Internalization racial identity attitudes, and negatively related to conformity to traditional masculine norms in the dominant culture in the United States.” (Mahalik et al., 2006, p. 102).

It is likely to conclude from this study and the review of literature that when after-school programs improve identity, confidence and achievement for young African American males, African American males are afforded greater opportunities to learn, thus increasing their opportunities post secondary (Mahalik, et al., 2006; Woodland, 2008). Woodland (2008) would argue the necessity of blending all three programs
mentioned as well as involving the family, school and community to foster and sculpt academic success for young black males in education.

**Teacher Student Relationships**

A study done by Maylor (2010) addressed the lack of presence of African American teachers in the schools and whether it influenced academic achievement of African American males. Maylor (2010) found that it was not so much the presence of an African American teacher in the school that influenced achievement and attainment among African American males; rather it was the quality of the teacher. The quality of the teacher as described in this study possessed skills that exhibited compassion for African American children and were teachers who have knowledge and pedagogic skills that influence the student to grow developmentally, learn and achieve in the classroom (Maylor, 2010). The argument thus is when administrators are recruiting teachers from diverse ethnic backgrounds investigation should be focused on the quality skills of the teacher and their ability to understand and promote learning and engagement for minority groups. Maylor (2010) also suggests that the ‘good quality’ teacher will aid in appropriate identity development of African American students thus improving self esteem and achievement.

A study done by Uwah, McMahon, and Furlow (2008) investigated school belonging, educational aspirations and academic self-efficacy of African American male high school students and their academic achievement. When African American male high school students are directly targeted by educators to participate, these acts of engagement by educators are seen by the student as meaningful, influencing the students’ academic competence, and improving achievement (Uwah, et al., 2008). When African American male students are not invited to participate in classroom...
discussions, these students are more likely to withdraw from academics and less likely to seek out academic opportunities (Uwah, et al., 2008). It is then suggested that because African American male students are less likely to engage, such behavior may influence some teachers into believing that these males are disinterested in their education. Teachers that actively engage African American male students in the classroom will invite these students to become part of the community classroom, improve confidence and engagement in learning, ultimately increasing academic achievement (Uwah, et al., 2008). The most significant finding of the study was that when African American males felt encouraged to participate these students had greater levels of academic self-efficacy (Uwah, et al., 2008). This finding is significant as it supports previous research, which suggests that academic self-efficacy is a better predictor of academic achievement than either self concept or self esteem (Uwah, et al., 2008).

What Uwah, McMahon and Furlow (2008) suggest is authentic interaction from educators will engage African American males and promote success. When such interactions occur in the school community these students begin to believe they can perform at a higher level. Additionally, it was found that a student’s perceived level of education (graduation from high school, four year college, graduate school) directly influenced their sense of academic competence (Uwah, et al., 2008).

Pedagogy is another theme that has emerged from the current literature and is a driving factor in promoting success for African American students. Uwah, McMahon and Furlow (2008) argue that pedagogy deeply impacts engagement for African American students. Achievement was also associated with teachers that were empathic and
committed to delivering quality instruction while working to build relationships with all of their students (Wiggan, 2007). Engaging pedagogy delivered by teachers that was culturally sensitive, along with their caring attitudes helped create a classroom climate of teamwork which encouraged student involvement and proved to motivate learning and deeper critical thinking (Wiggan, 2007).

The major themes that were revealed from students in Wiggans (2007) study were students desired more engaging than disengaging pedagogy from teachers. Students reported that when teachers encouraged critical thinking, were interactive and involved with their students, promoted teamwork and modeled self direction and were overall caring to their students all impacted their school achievement (Wiggan, 2007).

Thus, through the literature it is suggested that counselors work directly with educators to explain the importance of engaging African American male students. Counselors also need to work to improve African American male students’ academic aspirations through academic and career development through direct counseling and outreach within the community exploring post secondary options. Additionally, counselors in the schools need to investigate pedagogy of classrooms and develop professional development workshops for teachers that are research based to dispel myths of minority disengagement. By counselors helping educate teachers on engaging pedagogy, greater student involvement and engagement is likely to occur which will lead to greater academic achievement (Wiggan, 2007).

**Family/Community Support**

Maternal psychological distress impacts Black males’ academic opportunity and achievement (Dorsey, et al., 2007). The poor mental health of the primary caregiver, often the mother, creates added pressures for Black males to help provide for the family
(Mahlik, et al., 2006; Noguera, 2003). Current literature emphasizes the need for single parent mothers to seek support from extended family and community members that are positive (Chester, et al., 2007). Grandmothers, grandfathers, aunts and uncles can provide adequate support for African American children from single parent families to foster success academically in schools (Murry, et al., 2001). Myers and Taylor (1998) found that single mothers that were able to seek out and obtain support from their social networks showed greater resiliency and were less psychologically distressed.

Lower SES African American families experience great levels of distress and are academically disadvantaged compared to their white middle class counterparts (Epinosa, 2005). Many do not have the same educational resources at home when compared to their white middle class counterparts (Epinosa, 2005). Awareness of human service professionals and educators is important in improving minority students’ academic success (Vail, 2004). Educators should be culturally aware and sensitive being able to identify and refer families in their classroom to social services and other human service agencies to provide additional support outside of school (Vail, 2004). A school community that promotes educators and helping professionals to work in identified low SES communities to provide adequate educational and health related resources to disadvantaged families to improve academic success is vital (Vail, 2004). A team system of support is suggested by Vail (2004) to create equal opportunity in school for students of color.

When African American male students are provided appropriate support to meet their physical and psychological needs these students are better prepared to succeed in school (Chester, et al., 2007). When parental involvement in academics, positive
mentors in the community, academic and emotional support, and improved relationships between teachers and African American male students occurs, these students will be more likely to navigate the White middle class dominated educational system successfully.

Researchers and investigators need to be aware of systemic barriers that are oppressive to African American males. Continued research investigating systems is important to clearly identify barriers that minorities experience along with strengths that promote resiliency, which increases success in academic achievement. There has been a substantial amount of literature and research conducted that has identified deficits, barriers and macro systems that create oppression. Chapter 3 will propose the methodology and design of a research study that is interested in identifying variables that create resiliency, confidence and success for high achieving low SES African American male students.
CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH METHOD

Introduction

The purpose of this investigation was to understand where positive messages are received in African American males lived systems and how these messages contribute to academic success and advancement in higher education. The study attempted to identify a set of core components that promote academic engagement, opportunity and success in school for at-risk African American adolescent males interviewed. The investigator will discuss key factors that promote academic engagement and success as experienced by African American males interviewed. This study identified the value of strong positive role models in the community and their impact in the lives of young men who struggle and are at-risk of adjudication and academic failure. By sharing the lived experiences of at-risk academically successful African American males, this study highlights important factors that encourage academic success for African American adolescent males.

For this study, at-risk is defined as living with a single parent, and/or in a low SES setting or community. Achieving students were defined as students who hold a 2.5 GPA or higher and are on track to graduate on time with a standard or advanced diploma. The study used phenomenology to explore these from a strength based perspective.

Social science defines phenomenology as the study of lived experiences of participants and their meanings; it attempts to understand and interpret these meanings with a degree of depth and richness (Van Manen, 1990). The researcher was interested in understanding African American boys’ lived experience and what they believe has contributed to their success in school. Their lived experience possesses a valued truth
that begins to explain the phenomena experienced with data that is collected directly from their lived story (Flood, 2010). This data offers an explanation of the resiliency and ability to overcome many obstacles that stand in the way of their academic success. This study begins to understand the factors that promote academic success to encourage more community involvement and programs to support these students. Additionally, the study explored and identified important multicultural components that will aid educators. The study raises the importance of developing a positive sense of racial identity and its influence on academic success. Results of this study will aid in developing better culturally responsive instruction and awareness to improve engagement in the classroom for African American boys. Phenomenology guided the study.

Phenomenology. As discussed in Chapter 1, phenomenological theory was created by philosopher Edmund Husserl (1931). Since its birth, adaptations have been made to allow a better fit for the social sciences (Crotty, 1998; Flood, 2010; Husserl, 1964; Tan, McGrief, Couns, Wilson & Olver, 2009; Van Manen, 1990). Phenomenology focuses on the lived experience through the eyes of the subject and how that experience is shared with the researcher (Crotty, 1998; Flood, 2009; Husserl, 1964). In Husserl’s view, phenomenology is accomplished through conscious awareness of experience and language presented from the subject to the researcher, as if the researcher is operating from a blank slate, knowing nothing (Flood, 2010). Husserl believed that through conscious awareness in the moment and the researcher operating as a blank slate, true understanding of the phenomena could be achieved (Crotty, 1998; Husserl, 1964; Tan, McGrief, Couns, Wilson & Olver, 2009). Heidegger claims human
beings cannot enter into the world or experience observed without some bias (Tan et al., 2009).

Heidegger (1967) builds upon Husserl’s (1931) philosophy of Phenomenology to include bias as well as hermeneutics (Crotty, 1998). Hermeneutics is derived from the Greek word hermeneuein, which means to interpret, comprehend or make meaning from language (Crotty, 1998). The meaning in ancient Greek terms are the concepts of saying, interpreting, and translating which suggests the idea that something is new or of phenomena that needs to be made familiar (Crotty, 1998). Hermeneutic phenomenology is defined by having two main characteristics. The first part of characteristic is a descriptive methodology by which the researcher is attentive to how the subject or phenomena appear naturally without interpretation, reflection or attributing any meaning to the subject or event (Van Manen, 1990). The second part is interpretive in that there is no such thing as uninterrupted events (Van Manen, 1990). The contradiction is intentional and may be resolved when the researcher is able to agree that the facts or “data” of lived experiences are already meaningful (Van Manen 1990). Additionally, facts are transformed into language that makes them interpretable thus creating an interpretive process (Crotty, 1998; McConnell-Henry, Chapman, & Francis, 2011; Van Manen, 1990).

Thus, the focus of phenomenology is on revealing meaning versus defending an argument or creating a theory (Flood, 2010). This research is considered inductive and descriptive (Crotty, 1998; Flood, 2010). The process begins with a description of a situation that is experienced by the participant in daily life (Flood, 2010). Researchers obtain descriptions from their participants about the phenomena being mindful to keep
their own judgments and bias separate from the work. Finally, the researcher analyzes the experiences of the participants, sharing the interpretations with the participants to create an agreed consciousness of the findings (member checking), to make insights of how the meaning of the phenomena is experienced by the participants (Flood, 2010).

**Subjectivity Statement**

I come from a small farm that is situated right next to Monticello in Charlottesville, VA. Charlottesville is college town with a strong community of lovers of the arts and music, resulting in a rich, cerebrally stimulating environment. Growing up in this community, I was raised Christian which has definitely created values and beliefs of morality, virtue and humility. Growing up with one parent as an administrator in a public county school and one parent as a private business owner I feel my political views are mixed and carry many qualities from both conservative to liberal thoughts. I feel this blend has enabled me to be open-minded and curious while investigating questions within the field of social science. However, no individual is free of their values and judgment, though I work to be aware of my biases and how bias from my own experience and knowledge can affect my data and analysis.

Additionally, I am a marriage and family therapist who enjoys working with adolescents and families. I feel that I am a searcher of knowledge and work hard not to judge any one person or thing. I am naturally curious about human behavior, the role of oppression, and the influence of systems on individuals’ lives. Though I am a white middle class man, I continue to grow my awareness of my own white privilege and the influence it has on my experiences with others either in therapy, the lived world or research. I possess a base knowledge of the influence of oppression into systems and lived experiences of individuals, and daily continue to increase my awareness of
oppression and action toward social justice. As I grow as a therapist and researcher, I am not only changing as a person, but am committed to research that exposes injustice and obstacles for individuals and families. As a practitioner and researcher I, will continue my research in helping understand and aid disadvantaged populations to help build a bridge toward equality.

**Research Design**

The research study captured the lived experience of achieving African American males that are considered at-risk. The research design produced results that give voice to assets, strengths and resiliency of disadvantaged African American males and their ability to succeed in public education. The research lends insight to positive factors that contribute to African American male academic achievement. The research was guided by phenomenology and intends to begin explaining how some African American males do achieve under compromised conditions. It will help educators become more aware of not only obstacles, but also where these young men gather strength and confidence that enables them to achieve in schools. Finally, this study gives voice to an underrepresented population and allows the participants to voice their experiences about their struggles and achievements in their lived systems as it relates to their academic success and advancement.

The research study was qualitative in nature using four main steps to collect data: (1) participant selection and recruiting was used with a school districts database (2) individual open ended interviews were conducted by the researcher, (3) comparison to current literature was made (4) member checking was carried out to enhance validity of researcher interpretations. Triangulation of data occurred to ensure verification (Crotty,
1998; Hatch, 2002). The following sections will explain in detail participants and settings, data collection procedures, and analysis of data collected.

**Participants and Setting**

**Participants**

The participants were chosen from a purposeful sample from one urban high school and one rural high school in the same Southeastern school district. The researcher used the following sampling method to (1) address the research questions (2) create a more specific participant pool that captures the researcher’s interest (3) it is more specific than simple demographic samples as it captured a specific participant pool identified within the public school setting (Marshall, 1996). The school system is comprised of seven high schools. The researcher recruited participants from two schools targeting achieving at-risk African American males. Achieving African American males were defined by the study as youth that (1) are on track to graduate on time with either a standard or advanced diploma, (2) Hold a 2.5 GPA or higher (3) and are between the ages of sixteen and eighteen years of age. At-risk African American males were defined as being raised by a single parent mother (2) were between the ages of sixteen and eighteen years of age (3) and were considered low SES by being eligible for free and reduced lunch. The researcher communicated with the local research department of the school district, and principals to gain access to participants. A total of six students were selected for this case study.

**Settings**

Two schools were chosen in a Southeastern state in efforts to capture and reflect both urban and rural experiences in secondary education. The two schools reside within the same county and school district. The county has a population of 247,336 people.
based on the U.S. Census of 2010. The county consists of the following ethnicities: 69.6% White, 20.3% Black, 8.4% Hispanic of Latino origin, 5.4% Asian persons, 2.6% persons reporting two or more races, and 0.3% American Indian. The median household annual income taken from 2006-2010 data was 40,644. Twenty three percent of individuals living in the county are considered to be below poverty level (U.S. Census, 2010). Occupations within this county range from white collar to blue collar professions with agricultural as the main industry and employer in the rural community as reflected in the demographic data provided.

The community is a diverse setting where students in the urban public school setting interact across varied socioeconomic levels and ethnicities. The public school setting in the urban community encompasses many professional's children to public service workers. The three largest employers in the urban setting are the VA hospital, private hospital and the university including the medical teaching hospital that is a part of the university system. White-collar professions include, but are not limited to professors, medical doctors, dentists and lawyers. There are trades and small business owners immersed throughout the community, though many townspeople are drawn to the community by the university. Additionally, there are also many community member that work in blue-collar public service positions. Persons below poverty level within the urban community were 34.6% respectively in 2010 compared to 17.4% respectively in the rural community of this selected county (U.S. Census, 2010).

Table 4.1 provides demographics representing the entire county. It reflects total population median household income percent below poverty level and ethnicity. Tables that follow 4.1 represent each schools demographics respectively with the last table
reflecting the unweighted GPA and type of diploma to be received by students who participated in the study.

4-1 County demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Population</th>
<th>247,336</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Median annual household income</td>
<td>$40,644</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent below poverty level</td>
<td>23.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>69.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>20.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian and Alaska Native persons</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian persons</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander persons reported two or more</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino origin</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The rural high school is located twenty miles from the urban community in the same school district and county. Agriculture is a dominant industry within the rural community. Many families operate medium to large farms within the rural community. Owning or working on a farm is the livelihood for many community members that live in the rural district of the county. Some individuals do commute to the urban community to work various jobs at the university, and hospitals.

The urban high school demographics for the 2010-2011 school year was White 48.4%, 37.1% Black, 8.2% Hispanic, 0.3% American Indian, 5.9% multiracial or persons reporting 2 or more races (FLDOE, 2011). 37.5% of the students at the high school
were considered economically disadvantaged based on household income (FLDOE, 2011). The dropout rate for the school based on ethnicity was 0.7% White, 2.2% Black, 1.4% Hispanic, and 4.5% multiracial. This high school offers standard and advanced diplomas. It has AP courses along with an internationally accredited Cambridge program. Table 4.3 below gives an overview of the demographics of this urban high school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>Demographic %</th>
<th>Dropout by school</th>
<th>Dropout by district</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>48.4%</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>37.1%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economically disadvantaged</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The rural high school during the 2010-2011 school year was comprised of 68.1% White, 19.6% Black, 8.9% Hispanic, 0.2% American Indian and 3.2% multiracial or persons with two or more races (FLDOE, 2011). 33.2% of the students were considered economically disadvantaged based on household income. The dropout rate based on ethnicity was 1.6% White, 2.4% Black, 5.1% Hispanic and 5.6% multiracial. This high school also offers standard and advanced diplomas. The school has advanced and AP courses. This school also has a specialty program in agricultural science. The school offers four specialty programs within the agricultural science program, which are
veterinary assisting, animal science, agriscience technology and horticulture science.

Table 4-4 gives the demographics for this school.

### 4-3 Urban high school demographics for the 2010-2011 school year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>Dropout by school</th>
<th>Dropout by district</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>68.1%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economically disadvantaged</td>
<td>33.2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 4-4 Students selected for study from two southeastern high schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unweighted GPA</th>
<th>Qualified for free &amp; reduced lunch</th>
<th>Diploma</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jon</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jerry</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stevie</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jimmy</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

IRB approval was obtained from the university and the county school district. The researcher consulted with the district guidance supervisor to explain the purpose of the study, the procedures and to solicit input on school selection for the study. Once
research consent was obtained the researcher traveled to the designated schools and established contact, selection of participants and then conducted the interviews after obtaining informed consent documents. For students who were under the age of 18, both informed consent and assent were obtained before the interviews were conducted. Informed assent was additional documentation required that was given to the parents of the participants under the age of 18 to give permission for the researcher to interview the participants.

Data Collection Procedures

A phenomenologic al field study was conducted using interviewing, the review of current literature as sources of data and member checking. Specific research questions used to direct data collection and analysis included: (a) what is the lived experience of African American males in their education? (b) What are the factors that contribute to the success of African American males within their various operating systems (school, community, family)? (c) What are the struggles for African American males based on their lived experience within their various operating systems (school, community, family) that create resiliency and contribute to their success? (d) Where do African American males receive positive messages and encouragement that influence their engagement in education and academic success, specifically from a systems perspective?

The data for this research was collected in three main ways: using demographic selection criteria as described earlier for at-risk African American males, taping and transcribing the open ended interview, and reviewing archival data to support field data and findings. The selection criterion was used with the school districts database to select participants. Specific open ended questions, which will be described in a later section, in a semi structured interview format, served as a protocol for each interview.
Data was collected over a two week period, as the researcher conducted six interviews. Each interview lasted between thirty to fifty minutes. The audio recorded interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. The transcriptions were analyzed by the researcher and placed into meaning units to generate themes across interviews and interpret data into findings guided by the interviewees’ responses. Archival data in the form of current scholarly literature was used to frame the study, compare and support its results. Participants were assigned aliases to conceal their identity and respect their confidentiality.

**Selection**

A demographic criterion was created and used as a selection tool to identify and recruit at-risk achieving African American male students. The criterion was created to identify ethnicity, GPA, at-risk by identifying single parent or nuclear family, and SES. The desired sample of students was African American males between the ages of 16-18 years of age, with a cumulative GPA of 2.5 or higher, who achieved proficient or advanced scores on the state mandated assessment, are on track to graduate on time with either a standard or advanced diploma, and meet the criteria for “at-risk” as described earlier.

Six students were selected from the two high schools to participate in the study. Three students were chosen from the urban high school and three students were chosen from the rural high school. Four students lived with the identified primary caregiver as the mother. Two students had begun their high school career living with their single parent mother and were later removed from the home due to her inability to care for the student. One mother suffered from mental illness and information about why
the sixth student was removed from the home is unclear. These two students were placed in the care of their grandparents to complete their high school education. One student resided solely with his grandmother; the other student lived with both grandparents. These students were included in the study due to the resiliency of their stories despite the distress experienced in their family systems.

**Interviews**

Specific open-ended questions were used by the researcher and served as a protocol for each interview so the data collection format remained consistent. These interview questions were used as a guide to help maintain the consistency of the semi-structured interviews across participants. The researcher used the same list of questions for each participant. The interview questions were used as a guide to conduct the study and follow up questions were used as needed to deepen the understanding of the participants’ response. The following interview questions guided the interview:

1. What do you think contributed to your academic success in school when compared to your other friends that have not been as successful in school?
2. What has helped you stay on track to graduate with an advanced or standard diploma?
3. Can you describe the characteristics of Black male?
4. How does being a Black male influence or inhibit your success in school?
5. Who or what has made you feel proud about being a Black male?
6. Who specifically has encouraged you to achieve success with regards to your education?
7. Have you found community support to aid in your academic journey? If so can you please tell about this experience for you.
8. Is there anything else that has contributed to your success in school, be it a mentor, family member, church, community agency, teacher, that we have not covered? Could you briefly describe that experience to me?
Literature Review

Once the data was interpreted, and themes were generated from the study the researcher compared the findings of the study to current literature. The researcher used current literature to support the findings of the current research. Using peer reviewed literature is an additional step to ensure the trustworthiness of the study’s findings (Van Manen, 1990). The main purpose of examining current literature was to explore how the findings of the research compare and contrast to current literature. By comparing the findings of lived experiences of the participants with related studies and findings the researcher will improve the validity of the current study (Van Manen, 1990). To maintain study integrity, the researcher used triangulation of data from member checking, individual interviews, and review of literature, which can build a solid case for justification of themes (Creswell, 2003).

Member Checking

Data was collected, transcribed, interpreted and triangulated. The researcher was unable to meet with the participants again to review statements written in the researcher’s findings for accuracy and completeness due to testing and graduation. However, member checking did occur through distribution of individual packets with results and interpretations to participants of the study. Six packets were distributed, and four packets were returned to the researcher. Four students participated in member checking to ensure verification and trustworthiness of the study.

Upon completion of analysis the researcher created individual packets of information for each student interviewed. The packet that was distributed to the students included excerpts from that student along with the researcher’s interpretations that will be included in the research results. The packet also provided students with a detailed
procedure to review the material and give feedback to the researcher’s interpretations to improve trustworthiness and verification. The students were instructed to correct any misinterpretations given by the researcher to ensure the students experience was correctly captured in the research and results of the study. Only one minor correction was made from feedback received from one of the participants. The other three participants that did participate in the member checking agreed with all statements and interpretations of data.

This process of member checking improves validity (Hatch, 2002). If findings are incorrect, or participants wish to include additional information, findings were rewritten accordingly. The methodology for this study was qualitative and subjective in nature, so multiple methods of data collection were used to establish validity and verification, and member checking by the participants was encouraged. It is important to note that the rural school returned all three packets, whereas the urban school only returned one packet. The urban school was more difficult to regain access to the participant population. Direct transcription were used, and referenced against documented studies from the literature review for trustworthiness and authenticity (Van Manen, 1990).

**Reflexive Journal**

A journal was kept throughout the research process. The researcher took notes while interviewing participants in addition to daily reflections while analyzing the transcriptions. The researcher developed themes and reworked these themes recording them daily. As each day of analysis occurred themes were condensed and regrouped to capture the lived experiences of participants interviewed. The journal served as an
additional tool to guide the development of themes. Each day during analysis the journal was used to group and regroup themes developing richer meaning from the data.

**Data Analysis**

Inductive analysis was used to interpret the data in the study. Inductive analysis operates by focusing on specific data from interviews conducted, then moves to the general (Hatch, 2002). Meaning units were defined as individual statements that stand alone and provide meaning (Hatch, 2002). Understanding the specific elements of each transcription from the data collected generates meaning units from the data. The researcher worked to make connections of these meaning units among the transcriptions as a whole. Inductive analysis searches for patterns of meaning to provide general statements about phenomena under investigation (Hatch, 2002). By looking at the patterns across the data, the researcher worked to establish a status of general explanatory statements (Hatch, 2002).

The researcher began by taking the transcriptions and breaking the text into meaning units and then assigning meaning units to a domain. Domains are groupings retrieved from the meaning units that provide semantic relationships to inform the researcher. The researcher then looked for patterns individually and across domains arguing for these patterns to have the status of general exploratory statements about the phenomena.

The steps used by the researcher while analyzing the data are explained by Hatch (2002, p.162) as follows:

> Read the data and identify frames of analysis. Create domains based on semantic relationships discovered within frames of analysis. Identify salient domains, assign them a code, and put others aside. Reread data, refining salient domains and keeping a record of where relationships are found in the data. Decide if your domains are supported by the data and search data
for examples that do not fit with or run counter to the relationship in your domains. Complete an analysis within domains. Search for themes across domains. Create a master outline expressing relationships within and among domains. Select data excerpts to support the elements of your outline.

Chapter 4 will address analysis of the data collected. Chapter 4 provides excerpts from interviews conducted and interpretations of students’ experiences as at-risk African American males in public schools. It will examine the results based on the aforementioned steps provided in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 will explain students’ lived experiences in public education and what factors contributed to their academic success.
CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this investigation was to understand where positive messages are received in African American males lived systems and how these messages contribute to academic success and advancement in higher education. The study attempted to identify a set of core components that promote academic engagement, opportunity and success in school for at-risk African American adolescent males interviewed. The investigator will discuss key factors that promote academic engagement and success as experienced by African American males interviewed. This study identified the value of strong positive role models in the community and their impact in the lives of young men who struggle and are at-risk of adjudication and academic failure. By sharing the lived experiences of at-risk academically successful African American males, this study highlights important factors that encourage academic success for African American adolescent males in efforts to improve graduation rates nationally.

As outlined in Chapter 3, participants were selected using a Southeastern public school system’s database. Once approval was granted from the school system the researcher was given access to the county wide database. Three high schools were chosen to participate in the study. Two of the three high schools extended permission for this proposed research study within their school. Six students participated in the study. The two high schools chosen reflected one urban and one rural setting within the same county in efforts to capture a diverse experience of public education from the participants in the study.
The students were chosen based on criteria that placed them as at-risk students who are academically successful in secondary education. All six participants were seniors who were graduating on time from their designated high school with either a standard or advanced diploma. All of these students held a GPA of 3.0 or higher. These students were identified as at-risk based on the following criteria: they were eligible for free and reduced lunch and were living with a single parent mother. The researcher was able to identify the GPA and SES status by using the school system’s database. Low SES was determined by whether or not the student qualified for free and reduced lunch.

As contact was established and permission was granted at the high schools to conduct the research, the researcher met with the principal of the two identified schools explaining the study and the additional effort needed from the principal to recruit participants from the study. Since living status in the home was not identifiable through the use of the public schools database the researcher had to screen by asking potential participants if they lived in a single parent household.

A total of six participants were chosen for the study, three participants each were chosen from the urban and rural settings. Two of the six students used in the analysis originally lived with their mother, however were later removed from the home due to environment and biological circumstances. Due to mental illness and inability to care for their children in both circumstances caregiver rights were turned over to the grandparent(s). The resiliency and academic success of these students, despite many hardships adds to the value and worth of the research warranting their inclusion in the study.
The researcher will explain each theme individually within Chapter 4 illustrating the importance of each finding. The following themes emerged from the interviews and are listed by number of times these themes are reported across the data: Family Values, Self Concept, Belonging and Community Support/Outreach. It is important to note that ecological systems theory guides the interpretation and analysis of the findings. Themes independently and interdependently influence academic engagement for at-risk African American males.

**Results**

Four themes emerged from the interviews according to the degree of saliency experienced across the interviews that encourage the academic success of at-risk African American males. The themes are listed based on number of times observed across the six interviews conducted. Family Values, Self Concept, Belonging and Community Support/Outreach each independently and interdependently influence academic engagement and success in school for African American males. Each theme will be discussed summarizing interviewees’ experiences and influence each theme has on their academic journey and success.

**Family Values**

Family values is the strongest theme that emerged from the analysis and appears to be the core foundation for academic success for the youth interviewed. Family values encourage basic skills that are required to be successful academically such as drive, motivation, independent thinking, and strong work ethic. As will be discussed in Chapter 5, family values is systemic, building necessary skills that promote the students’ identity, self-esteem and confidence. Family values are the foundation for fostering greater
adaptability in schools toward experiencing oppression, overcoming stereotyped
expectations of boys in school and increases the ability for males to ask for help.

Additionally, as will be reflected through the excerpts of the interviews family
support is experienced through extended family. Though all but two students at the time
of the interview lived with their mother and siblings access to grandparents, aunts,
uncles and cousins appeared across interviews. Cultural family dynamics were
experienced across interviews where families support each other through extended
family networks. Some students had supportive fathers though students reported
infrequent contact with their fathers. Students reported the importance of having
mentors within the family, the strong influence and wisdom expressed by grandparents,
and finally, having cousins or uncles who had succeeded academically.

**Single parent mother encouragement**

Jerry shares how his mother’s values inspire and encourage academic
engagement. He share core values of work ethic that his mother established in his
household

Jerry: My mom always told me, if you live in my house, you’re going to either go
to school or go get a job. And if you’re not 18 or older, you’re going to go
to school. That’s something my mom always said. It, it kind of puts a fire
under your butt but it lets you know that you have somebody who cares
about your life, who cares about where you end up. And I think that’s an
important piece that a lot of kids probably are missing.

Jerry offers a clear example of the importance of parental involvement in African
American males’ educational journey. This mother establishes clear rules and
boundaries within the house and expresses her expectations for her children to succeed
in life. Additionally, this student is able to understand that though his mother is rigid in
her expectations; her rationale behind her expectations is for her children to be
successful. According to Jerry, his mother is teaching responsibility and fostering independence by outlining expectations. She is instilling work ethic values, support, and motivation to be successful. He continues expressing the differences experienced in his household compared to some of his friends.

Jerry: I know some kids, like, their parents are never home. Their parents never really - - they only talk to their parents a couple of times a week. They just breeze, like, breeze through life, like they don't have any motive. They never show their dad or their parents their report cards, 'cause their parents probably won't even have time to see it. And my mom's a working mom also, but she still finds time or makes time for us to talk to her about any school work that we need done, so, I think it's all about the parents. It starts with the parents.

A few strong points are raised within this excerpt with respect to parent involvement and teaching children to become independent responsible learners. Jerry articulates the difference between some of his friends and his experience in school with regard to support from parents. His experience in being parented is quite different than some of his friends. His friends who do not have supportive and involved parents do not possess the same academic motivation. Instead, they “breeze” through school and based on his report do not seem to care or engage in learning. Jerry expresses the importance not just of having a mother who is concerned about his academics, but one who is also involved. He expresses feeling supported, which increases his level of confidence and encourages his own engagement in education.

Lastly, the mother described above is a working mom. She is often busy and at work as described by Jerry, yet she finds time to support her child’s academic experience while promoting the importance of pursuing and successfully achieving an education. Again she understands and values the importance of education, while
teaching her children values that are required to be successful in school such as work ethic, motivation, and focus.

Jon continues sharing family values passed from his mother and his experience developing his self-concept. She helped him establish comfort in his identity through encouragement, experience and dialogue.

Jon: My mother taught values that I still hold to today that, helps me get through school sometimes. I would guess that some people think that personal image is more important than anything else and I've never really understood that, because I wasn't raised that way. I was always raised to believe in who I am and if you can accept for who you are - - if other people can't accept you for who you are, then they aren't your real friends. And I'm thinking like why would people care so much about personal appearance?

One important piece from this passage is the family value of fostering acceptance of self and the mentoring of the mother helping her son build his own sense of identity. Identity development is critical in early and late adolescence, especially for minority groups who not only have to navigate basic development through lifespan, but also racial identity development as they compare themselves to the majority. Here the mother is instilling basic values of learning to understand oneself, accepting oneself and learning to love oneself. This mother is helping her son develop a positive self-concept and identity for himself. This dialogue probably has been an ongoing conversation within the household, and is significant toward the student’s academic success and development of self-concept.

Jon continues.

Jon: The main value was to, to always pay attention and always listen, and always be willing to compromise. If there’s a subject in class and I’m thinking like, oh gosh, I do not want to do this, I really don’t. And then my mom would tell me to be willing to compromise. I'm like, okay. If we do this, can we at least do this and that? The teacher would agree. And then, you know, there’d be something to keep me hooked on, cause you
know, I won’t lie. I don’t always pay attention in class… when times get tough, you’re gonna have to work hard. You can’t just slack off and say, oh I can’t do this. She’d say, no, you have to work for what you want. You can’t just slack off. And I guess over time I just kept that with me and it’s just helped me through a lot of stuff, pretty much.

Another important value that is expressed in this passage is teaching skills that help African American males learn how to navigate educational situations where the student does not always embrace work demands. The mother here teaches compromise or goal orientation. The student uses the term compromise, but it seems more appropriate to interpret this finding that some work is not always desirable and by setting a reward or something to look forward to at the end of the assignment completing the assignment is more manageable. Again, the parent is teaching core skills that enable the student to be successful in school.

Work ethic emerges again by the mother sharing and emphasizing what is necessary to be successful in school and in life. The mother expresses the importance of the willingness and value of work ethic in school. Values of motivation, determination and focus, create a work ethic that’s passed from parent to child.

Jerry supports the previous students’ experience of having a supportive mother who values education and teaches the importance of work ethic.

Jerry: I live with my mom and my brothers. I think my determination and my focus. Having a parent who is constantly on me about my grades because my mom weren’t always on top of her grades, so she always pushed, me and my brothers to get a better education and to, move better, move forward in life. And we’ve always tried our hardest to make sure that we did better than our parents, that we want better for us so that we will have - - never have our families go through. And that is just something my mom always instilled in us. She always said, work comes before anything so, she’s always made sure our education was the number one thing in our house.
Education is expressed as a core family value in this passage. All members of this student's family value education and he is able to receive positive messages about the importance of education across his lived family system. Jerry is able to be taught about experienced losses of his family members and possibly poor decisions in his parent's educational endeavors that emphasize the importance of his own education. Jerry expresses a desire to be successful and to advance further in his education than his parent. A key piece in this passage is that though his caregiver may not have been successful in her own educational journey, she understands the importance of education and his mother strongly supports the advancement of her son in his educational journey.

**Extended family encouragement**

Grandparents provide support within the family system to encourage the importance of education. Though all but two students interviewed live with the identified caregiver as a single parent mother, culturally the at-risk African American males interviewed experience communal support throughout their extended family. Students interviewed expressed support across their family system and receive encouragement to do well in school. Jon shares how his grandmother became a role model and mentor instilling again values of work ethic and motivation to succeed.

**Jon:** I remember freshman year. I was in algebra. It was algebra 1. I wasn’t doing my homework. I did not feel like doing it. And I was thinking, because my grandma, she worked hard, because she worked at Chance for 25 years. Retired, and then worked at the VA for another 17. And I'm thinking like, wow, come on Jon. If grandma can do this, I mean, come on, this is algebra. Like, come on, you can do this. Let’s go. I had to just push through that. I think about the things that my family have gone through, life is not always gonna be easy.
Again a message is passed down from older generations about the value of work ethic. In this passage, Jon illustrates how his grandmother inspired him through her own struggles and the action she took to provide for herself and her family. The opportunity to witness his grandmother’s work ethic inspired his own engagement in academics. He was able to internalize and embrace his grandmother's work ethic using it as a motivator for his own engagement in academics. Using lived family experiences and messages he reflected on his own struggles with academics. Using his grandmother as a role model he was able to understand that life can be difficult at times and that in order to advance in life motivation, focus and hard work are required.

Stevie continues to support Jon’s experience of having extended family members providing encouragement and support, which helped Stevie, engage in academics. He expresses how care and support helped him believe in himself and that he could achieve academically. Teaching responsibility, motivation, and independence while offering support is what stands out in this passage.

Stevie: One would have to be my mother. Another would be my grandmother. My uncle, and of course, as well as my guidance counselor. Those four main people really like, helped me throughout my high school years, academically. Having the people that actually care and that love what they’re doing and that want to see better for their students as well as their child, gives you a sense of accomplishment. These people really take time out to help me, and help me grasp what I’m not understanding, and give me that push and that sense of feeling, you know, I’m teaching you how to do this but it’s going to be ultimately up to you whether you use it or not. Giving me a guideline and leaving me room to create my own sense of way.

Stevie experiences messages from family members who value education, show support and grooming for young men to be accomplished in academics and life. Additionally, the family and guidance counselor in this case encouraging the student to
achieve in academics is critical to foster this student’s academic success. The guidance counselor’s support and encouragement will be discussed later in educational personnel.

It helps to get the adolescent thinking seriously about his educational journey, while sharing the value and importance of education, but ultimately leaving the work and motivation up to the student as expressed by Stevie. The expectation and belief has been set for the males that they can be accomplished and succeed in school, yet must motivate from within to succeed in this passage. This student’s experience illustrates the importance of families mentoring their children while offering room for independent thinking and error. This student expresses his appreciation for being able to make choices in his education and life, though at times they may not have always been right. Giving African American males freedom to make decisions, and encouraging and supporting their academic success promotes their development into responsible independent learners who become academically successful in school.

Tom shares a similar story to others interviewed, sharing his perceptions of who has encouraged him to do well in school. As this excerpt will describe, Tom is influenced by messages passed from his extended family members. Family involvement and encouragement helps Tom begin to value education, engaging in academics and inspiring him to be successful in school.

Tom: Grandparents. My grandparents. ‘Cause um, I know that when they were born back in the ‘30s, 1930s, and that’s when they basically told me how they really didn’t graduate, they didn’t get that far in school, only fourth or fifth grade. So, they really pushed me to get even further than they did, obviously I did. But then, towards the end of my high school year, or maybe middle of my high school year, that’s when they were telling me to graduate, get a diploma and go on to college. So, that really pushed me
further along as well to an education-wise, to wanna prove to myself, to my grandparents that, I can do it.

Receiving encouragement from extended family members motivates Tom to be academically successful in school. Grandparents can serve as a primary source of support encouraging males to do well in school. Past generations as experienced in this research share their shortcomings with education; such as unequal opportunities in education compared to Whites and experiences with discrimination with their grandchildren not to discourage, but to encourage. These passed-down stories serve as a catalyst to motivate African American males to engage in academics as experienced by Tom. A family duty or honor emerges as described by Tom, motivating him to succeed in school. The value of education and opportunity for advancement in life that an education provides engages Tom in academics. These messages carry a strong sense of power from elders within the lived African American male’s life. Family systems that teach the value and opportunity that education brings improve academic engagement and success as described by Tom.

Jimmy shares the influence his grandparents had on his academic engagement and success. Jimmy’s testimony supports Tom’s experience of generational family values influencing his engagement in academics. Jimmy expresses how he receives messages of encouragement and support from his grandparents.

Jimmy: Um, mostly comes from - - I mean, my grandparents always, like I stay at my grandparents’, they always tell me the best thing for them to do was to move on because they didn’t even finish - - I don’t think they even went to like, middle school. Make sure you graduate high school, make sure you go to college, ‘cause it, - - it doesn’t guarantee anything but it opens up a door for a lot of opportunities, that’s basically what everybody tells me, there’s opportunities out there, go for it. And me, being a minority, there’s a lot of options out there for me.
Again a core value expressed from grandparents in this passage is the value and opportunity that an education brings. This theme is expressed throughout all interviews. This value of education is a critical theme that fosters engagement in academics for these young men. Each student shared this core family value and how it has influenced their academic success and motivation.

**Experiences of modeling from extended family**

Another subtheme that emerged that supports family values were experiences of modeling that occurred for some students and how it influenced their academic achievement in school. Jerry shared the impact his cousins had on his own academic engagement. Seeing family members that are successful impacted Jerry positively. It helped him engage in his academics. Positive role models and mentoring encourages academic engagement and success for students interviewed.

Jerry: I’ve had a couple of cousins that have graduated from high school, and they’ve went to college, played ball there and they’ve graduated from college also. They’ve helped me to realize that it’s not all about sports. It’s all about what you want to do in life and exceeding in life. My cousins have talked to me about college life and how it’s going to be and how not to be scared of it. Just to go there and embrace it. And you have opportunities and take advantage of your opportunities and don’t let them go to waste.

Jerry shares core family values about right and wrong along with having positive role models within his family. This family values education and demonstrates the importance of mentoring children and teaching core values that will promote engagement in academics. Having the opportunity to discuss college with his cousins has afforded this student an opportunity to explore possible post-secondary opportunities. Exposure to college opportunities and positive mentoring experiences encourages Jimmy to think about future opportunities, which results in doing well in
school. Jimmy sees his cousins’ success at the collegiate level; it fosters and encourages his academic success. He is able to experience and see something that he would like to obtain, which helps with future orientation and goal setting preparing this student for life after high school.

James continues to support the importance of positive modeling within the family discussing the experience that having both positive and negative role models in his family provided him, encouraging him to be academically successful.

James: Cause seeing you know, my uncles, the ones that did do good, and the ones that did do bad, seeing how everyone who treated the ones who had been to jail who had went down the wrong path and seeing the response that, you know the ones that had did something with their life, seeing the response they got from the different family members, and seeing how my - - some of my family members that had went to prison, get all into drugs, seeing how their life was, it kind of had an impact on me like, I don't want to be like that.

James shares that his engagement in academics is partly due to the family values placed on family members and their choices in life. He explains how he saw his family members were treated by their elders after their involvement with drugs and time served in jail and explains how he did not want to be seen by his elders that way. This excerpt again shows strong family values in choosing the right path knowing right from wrong and praise that is given for family members who do succeed. This student has been impacted both negatively and positively by his uncles' failures and successes. Through witnessing these failures and successes of his uncles, he has chosen to focus on being successful and contributing to his family through succeeding in school. Through seeing the outcomes of negative choices in life of his family members this student made a choice to succeed in education.
In summary, despite some negative life experiences of the caregivers, work ethic, modeling, promoting identity of self, educational support, valuing education, and creating a space within the home that promotes responsible independent thinkers are family values that are expressed throughout the interviews. These values are present across all of the interviewee’s transcripts and provide valuable insight to create measures of support for African American males who grow up in compromised living conditions. Family values were the most dominant of themes experienced across the interviews. Family values serve as the core foundation to other elements and systems that promote academic success for these youth.

**Self Concept**

A grounded sense of identity was expressed throughout the interviews and emerged as the second strongest theme. Each student maintained a developmentally appropriate sense of his own identity, esteem and confidence, leading to positive self-image. The theme of identity was influenced by the former theme of family values. The foundation provided by supportive and encouraging cultural family dynamic promotes exploration of self and the establishment of one’s own identity. Identity was observed as the second most frequently expressed theme across the interviews as what contributes to African American males’ academic success in schools. As revealed in the interviews, secure identity helps students overcome society’s message for boys to “be cool” or “act out” in school and instead encourages boys to ask for help in schools as well as promoting action and doing in academics. These findings are supported in the following passages.
Development of self-respect and a healthy identity

Stevie discusses the importance of having self-respect and establishing a healthy identity. A healthy identity is explained by the development of sense of self and how self relates to others and the world as experienced by students interviewed. Students interviewed express a healthy identity by the ability to have control over choices in their life and becoming comfortable with who they are as a person. He explains how he developed self-respect and a healthy identity through support from his lived systems and intrapersonal dialogues.

Stevie: By having respect for yourself and believing in yourself first, you know, that’s very important. You can have this huge amount of support, or encouragement, and I feel as though you won’t do it unless you believe it yourself, and so by thinking it and saying it in your head, and, over and over I can do this, and having your support or your encouragement from wherever it may come from, you know, it uplifts you, then that makes you want to go for it and say, I can do this. Some people may struggle with it but I’m not saying that you have to have that understanding when you first get to high school... At some point try to picture or imagine yourself as, you know, of what you might want to be or who you want to be.

Stevie states that identity is critical in his academic success. He shares the importance of understanding himself, establishing his sense of identity and how that motivates him to be academically successful. He discusses concepts of managing anxiety, finding meaning in life and the capacity for self-awareness. Additionally, he motivates himself by telling himself he can do which helps him believe he can do well in school. Through use of encouraging himself, and taking action he has experienced academic success.

Support, encouragement, belief in self and action are components in this student’s academic experience that help promote and establish a positive sense of identity. Accomplishment in academic tasks leads to greater self esteem, which in turn yields
confidence and willingness to take on harder tasks in academics, creating greater opportunities for success as expressed by Stevie. This student shares that support and belief from others whether it be teachers or parents increases belief in self which promotes action in education that lead toward academic success.

Jimmy continues to explain the importance of developing a positive self concept and developing self-respect through introspection and how it increased his ability to succeed in school. In his narrative, he discusses the struggles that he experienced when defining his identity and image in relation to others. His story is significant, discussing the troubles he experienced in school by “acting cool” and “acting out” in class to be socially accepted. He explains the significance that support and encouragement played from his family and educational systems creating a space in his life to begin thinking about the importance of education and the possibility of opportunities beyond high school.

Jimmy: I don’t carry myself in a way that most black guys would carry themselves, like walking around with their, you know, sagging, or walking around with the little walk and everything. I used to do, but I turned away from that around middle school, from that teacher. You know getting away from the lifestyle and mindset of, oh I wanna be this because I know if I go out, a lot of people won’t like it in my hood might not respect me for it… Mostly what other people think about you other than what, what you think. It’s more what other people think that gets a lot of people and they shouldn’t have to worry about what other people think, ’cause in reality, it comes to you and what you’re going to do in life. You’re living your life, so don’t worry about what everybody else thinks. Just live your life and do what’s best for you. When you look back and life and you say you lived your life the way you wanted to, then you can be happy than by saying I lived my life the way they wanted me to and not the way I wanted to.

Jimmy explains his experience of changing his appearance and rejecting what he sees as a counter-culture or stereotype of how a black male is suppose to act and dress. In middle school, it appears he experienced being a part of a counter culture
group that rejected academic success. His friends, as he describes assumed a clothing style that matched rappers and acted in a way that rejected doing well in school while assuming this identity as part of their culture, how they thought they were supposed to act and dress. These students lived out what is known as fictive kinship, rejecting the majority white rule and acting differently to maintain their racial identity (Howard-Hamilton & Behar-Horenstein, 1995). He experienced failures in school while he was a part of this group and what he perceived as who and what his identity was supposed to encapsulate.

The last year of middle school he experienced a critical incident that involved his grandmother and his schoolteacher. This meeting had a significant impact on this student. He realized that following an assumed media stereotype of “being black” (sagging pants, strut, and acting up in school) may not be representative of himself nor his racial identity. The influence of his grandmother and her concern along with his teacher encouraged him continue to explore his identity. As he began to reexamine his values, he chose to redefine his identity along with reprioritizing values within his lived systems. Change occurred.

While exploring a new identity he began to become more concerned about what he thought about himself versus what others thought about him. He began to realize that life really had to do with his own meaning and purpose in life. This became another step in creating his identity and sense of self in relation to the world. The more internally focused he became, while developing his sense of self-respect, the more he was able to realize that style, coolness, and “acting cool” was not as important as fulfilling one’s potential and establishing a life on his own terms.
This continued development of self-concept grew into comfort and respect of self as a person while developing a healthy identity. As he states, he realized he needed to live his life for him and not how others wanted him to live it. This critical change of perspective occurred with the assistance of a teacher and the influence of his grandmother. This experience began the process of self-discovery, which led to introspection, and rediscovery of self. The outcome of the meeting and reflection of self was a newly discovered self and identity. His new self-concept was internally driven, doing things for himself, bettering his life and academic career.

The transformation allowed the student to grow in self-respect, self-esteem, and identity to stand apart from others and to improve his future by focusing on academics. Again, at a critical moment this student had a revelation that "being cool" was not as important as understanding self and searching for one's life meaning and purpose. Through development of self-concept Jimmy was able to reassess the importance of education and refocus on what was important.

Jerry shares his experiences on developing a positive self-concept and its influence in his academic success and ability to feel comfortable in his identity as a successful student when others may view him as different.

Jerry: I think it's the difference between looking up to someone and wanting to embody that person and be them. I think if you have your own sense of style and, your own thoughts and ideas, that's great and maybe you can kind of mix your ideas with the people you admire to get better ideas, better things. I think it's all about being yourself, and letting your ideas and creativeness flow... And if I see a negative experience come my way, I always go the other direction. Letting them see who I am and why I am this way, instead of causing negativity. I like to do things a lot on my own, but I will ask for help when I need it. I like feeling accomplished. I have my own style. 'Cause I feel like, if you're the same then there's never gonna be any change at all. I have to break out of the funk, and get my own strength, and you know your rhythm back.
Jerry expresses the importance of understanding and establishing a healthy identity that is reflective of who he wants to be. He models some of his identity from positive role models, yet remains authentic to himself by creating his own identity that fits his personality. He exhibits higher-level thinking and reflection of self while sculpting his identity to ensure that he has ownership of his expressed self. Strong characteristics of confidence emerge as he speaks about being independent, focused, and having the ability to ask for help when he needs it, which many males struggle with due to messages passed from society and media about how a male should act in society and in school (Jackson & Dempster, 2009; Pollack, 2006).

He expresses being strong in your mind, which suggests the ability to self reason, making decisions that may sometimes go against the group or what is seen as “cool” by his peer group. Jerry is depicted here in the research as a person who exhibits a strong sense of identity in self, confidence, and esteem. His comfort within his identity influences his academic success and ability creating his own opportunity. Jerry is comfortable with his identity, manages difficult times through self-reflection, seeks support when needed, and take action making him less likely to experience role confusion and mental health issues. Jerry continues.

Jerry: I think if more people sit back and just name all the things that make them who they are, or the things they like about themselves, it’ll be easier for them to have positivity and to do much more at school. ‘Cause when you’re in school, not only do you have work, but you have other things based off which you like and who you are and what you like to do, it can help you to do the things that you love to do, instead of just doing work. You don’t want to binge everything and just, cram it all in your head because I think it’s not gonna respond right. If you just separate some things, you know. Personal life, school life, fun. I think all three of those kind of connect and it’ll help you inside - - I mean, improve into education.
Jerry explains the importance of understanding oneself and the importance in creating, accepting and respecting one’s identity. As he has experienced comfort and acceptance of his own identity and maintains a positive self-image, he discusses how it leads to a positive effect on his academics. He suggests that by growing aspects of self such as creative self, social self or athletic self can create balance and wellness.

Jerry’s experience suggests that nurturing different aspects of the indivisible self maintains positive mental health and actually aids in his academic engagement and success (Myers & Sweeney, 2004). This perception of growing aspects of self is important in understanding Jerry’s development of self concept and life management techniques. He is aware that too much involvement in any one area may affect growth or cause possible distress in another area of self. However, working to maintain balance and grow various aspects of self will promote greater overall wellness and functioning in life (Myers & Sweeney, 2004).

**Development of belief of self and confidence**

Tom’s passage continues to explain the importance of developing a self-concept and extends concepts of self concept to include belief in self to be academically successful in school. He discusses the importance of believing in oneself to be successful in school, as well as athletics. Tom discusses the importance of establishing confidence in self, being able to ignore negative criticism or opinions of others and a determination and work ethic required to do well in school.

Tom: Um, I was basically failing. I was like, at one point, one point oh’s and stuff like that, wasn’t doing very good, Ds and Fs on report cards, and I didn’t have much help along the way in school until I got to high school when I started to realize that grades started mattering more, and to want to help myself out first instead of depending on other people to help me… because if they don’t believe in me, or what I look like then that means I have to work hard, push forward and that’s what drives me. If you don’t
believe in who I am or what I can do, then I’m gonna make you believe that I can do it. If you don’t have confidence, you’re not getting very far and if you believe in what others tell you, negative stuff, you may not make it in this world.

Tom reflects on what helped him realize that he had to take action for his own academic career. Whether from family values or from educational personnel this student came to the realization that in order to do well in school he had to focus, put forth his best effort and take control of his own life. Early in the passage, Tom talks about taking responsibility for one’s own actions and outcomes in the classroom, whereas many students often place responsibility on others for their success or failure in school. A positive self-concept develops the belief in the individual that they can accomplish tasks they attempt as described by Tom. Tom appears to transfer his basketball skills such as motivation, drive, hard work and intensity modifying those skills to fit in the classroom. As a result confidence in the classroom becomes a by-product of academic success.

Developing belief in self and confidence appears to be a critical component toward achieving academic success for African American males. Each of the students interviewed share the importance of believing in themselves, building confidence and the impact these two characteristics have in developing their self-concept. Accepting oneself and comfort within one’s identity creates greater opportunities for success in school as it removes the need for “acting cool” to trump learning. Identity development and understanding of self helps remove the desire to “be cool in school”.

These students describe that they are not concerned about what others think about them, which helps their educational success. It helps their success as it removes the fear felt by so many high school students, the fear of looking “un-cool when asking
for help”. Tom continues to describe how he developed skills to control his temper and aggression in school and how it led to academic success.

Tom: When I first got in high school, I had bad temper tantrums. I had bad issues my anger, and as the years have gone on I started to realize that I can control myself, that it’s a mind thing. That it’s not what other people say or do to you, that it’s basically a mind thing to yourself. That if you want to be calm and relaxed, you have to do it yourself. No one can change you. Not a counselor, not, not a parent, not a friend, nobody. You’re just you. ‘Cause you have to want to change yourself in order to be changed. ‘Cause I don’t look at myself to be cool with others. I believe in myself. I believe in the way I dress, the way I talk, the way I do things is, is all right. Then I don’t let other people judge how I am, just to fit in.

Tom explains how management of negative emotions is another skill that is required for academic success in school. Tom by learning to control his negative emotions went from fourteen discipline referrals his sophomore year to zero since his junior year. Again, he discusses the awakening he experienced: if he wanted to change, he had to do it himself, and be in control of his emotions. This led to exploration of the mind and emotion connection. He realized that he could manage his emotions through his cognition. This led to better control of his negative emotions and the ability to use think through his negative emotion to better manage himself in school. By managing his negative emotions, reducing his tantrums at school, he was able to stay in school more, and receive fewer referrals. Fewer discipline referrals afforded more time in the classroom, which led to better grades in school.

Developing a positive self-concept is critical to academic success in school. As African American male students are able to develop a positive concept of self their confidence, belief in self, and development of taking more control of their academic success will occur. Students who are able to become more introspective and incorporate more aspects of self into their management of daily living will be more
successful. By balancing and learning to practice wellness their overall functioning improves. This has a positive effect on academics. Awareness and respect of self creates confidence, and self-efficacy along with belief in self. Students interviewed were able to reject perceived stereotypes of males in school and ways of “acting cool” in school, which often can negatively affect academics. Instead, the African American males interviewed were willing to ask for help due to their comfort in self and identity. Asking for help is a critical skill in being academically successful.

**Belonging**

Belonging is the next theme that emerged from the interviews and is supported across three subthemes. The three subthemes experienced in the interviews are, African American male identity, educational personnel and extracurricular involvement. Students interviewed had a strong sense of racial identity, which helped in encouraging students to engage in the school community. As experienced by students interviewed, a sense of belonging to the school community increased their engagement in academics. Belonging was experienced by either joining athletic teams, organizations or by relationships created with educational personnel. One or a combination of all three promoted a sense of being a part of the school community, which influenced academic success. Students’ share how belonging is important and played a big role in helping students achieve academic success.

**African American male identity**

African American males’ understanding and development of racial identity influences their ability to be academically successful and find belonging within public school. Students interviewed share experiences from implicit to explicit prejudices experienced by teachers, students and faculty believing stereotypes of African
American males from the media and experiences of prejudice within their own race. Students interviewed in the study were able to seek out support from family members, famous cultural leaders, community members or educational personnel to help develop their sense of cultural identity and how they interacted within the family, school and larger community as an African American male. Adults talking with African American male students about their racial identity and culture helps increase greater outcomes of self concept and academic success for African American males (Graham & Andersen, 2008).

Stevie describes the struggles experienced by African American males upon entering high school. He shares his perceptions of the difficulties associated with being an African American male and the social pressures to “fit in” at school, which often encourages “acting out” or being the “class clown” which often negatively impacts academic success.

Stevie: I feel as though African Americans have it much harder because we tend to not push ourselves and we tend to depend on other people to help us get by, and to help us push forward instead of being more independent and doing stuff ourselves. I feel as though that’s a very hard thing to deal with especially when entering high school. You want to be the class clown, you just wanna be cool with everyone and so you tend to not focus on your education. You just want to be liked and it’s that feeling of a sense of belonging. And when people will tend to get that feeling they don’t worry about anything else, oh I have somewhere I belong now, so you know, I’m just going to do what everyone else does.

Stevie feels that many African American males tend to follow the assumed role that society or media has given them in their identity as a student in school. He speaks of assumed masculine roles within school of all races. Males are conditioned in society to be tough, to act cool, and be funny (Pollack, 1999). Society has normalized disengagement in academics for young men and rewarded boys who are tough, cool or
funny whether in school or society. Masculine culture looks down on boys who work hard and achieve success in school, terming these boys soft or nerdy (Kehily & Nayak, 1997). Humor or being funny is the vehicle boys turn to at school instead of using academic achievement to manage emotions and fit in (Kehily & Nayak, 1997). He shares his experience of peers not engaging in academics due to wanting to be “cool”, but also what he believes his peers have learned from society. He shares that many African American males expect others to help them or depend on others to get by in life and school.

He also talks about the importance of belonging in a group. Stevie’s experience is that entering high school is hard and a high school student wants to fit in. He expresses that it is harder for African American males and that often fitting in becomes more important that doing well in school. Belonging can influence academic success either positively or negatively based on the group the student decides to join and build their identity around based on Stevie’s experience. He continues explaining the influence positive role models have in his life and how it encourages him to do well in school.

Stevie: Women activists, black politicians, entertainers, or just in general seeing black people succeed in a male-dominated, white world makes me proud. For us as minorities coming from such a small group seeing us getting stronger and, you know having respect for ourselves and dignity for ourselves just to say that we deserve better and that we can do better. You know just put the work in and you will succeed. I would say I enjoy living life. I enjoy taking the time out to see how far I’ve come and just say, I accomplished, like, I’m not where I want to be yet but I’ve come a long way and I’m heading toward where I want to be.

Picking positive role models inspires success, leadership, determination and accomplishment as described by Stevie. Seeing positive African American leaders of the community succeed in large markets such as entertainment and politics is inspiring and keeps teenagers motivated. Again, family values and core values that promote hard
work, respect for self and heritage inspire African American males to be successful in school. It seems that Stevie knows that he does not have to take assumed or historical roles of African American males or males in general in school and somewhere a message of being proud of cultural heritage has been transmitted. As he reflects on looking up to his cultural leaders and shares their success stories it makes him proud to be an African American male. It also inspires him as he sees the struggles of his race as a whole over the course of time and instead of believing a self-fulfilling prophecy of African American males in school, he chooses to better himself by engaging in academics.

Jerry discusses his experiences of being an African American male in school and who has encouraged him in African American culture to do well in school.

Jerry: I would say all the black males who have graduated high school and gotten a college education are heroes to me. Just because of their exceeding of people’s expectations. They’re not going to let [unintelligible] hold them down, put a damper over what they’re trying to do. I admire all black males who’ve made something of their lives. I think if more young black males look up to more, to older black males, I think it will instill determination and maybe a goal to be like them or to accomplish something just like they did, so, I think it’ll help if somebody has a role model.

Jerry speaks of the students who are successful and their ability to overcome obstacles and not be held down and show they can succeed. This takes resiliency, determination, and strong work ethic. All of these young men possess these qualities as is shown through their success. Positive role models are a key for engaging African American males and to encourage success in academics as described by Jerry. Jerry identifies with positive African American role models that are successful. He uses their success to guide his own academic success. He sees these men that have succeeded as accomplished African American males, identifying a value for Jerry as being
successful in school and wanting to belong in a group of successful African American males.

Tom continues to explain the importance of having positive African American role models. He discusses how Martin Luther King gave him courage to overcome negative actions or interpersonal conflict by using negative acts experienced toward Tom to motivate him to do better in school, increasing his knowledge base. The interviewer is included in this excerpt as a dialogue better reflects Tom’s experience of developing his African American male identity by including the interviewer’s excerpts to understand the content Tom is sharing.

Tom: Martin Luther King, he made me believe that you don’t have to use violence to get your point around to others. So, in my case, I just use their words to push me further, instead of using violence.

Interviewer: So, instead of retaliating you use that as something to make you stronger, to push you harder to prove them wrong.

Tom: Yeah, exactly.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. And a piece of that that comes out, or the word that I’m thinking about is education, the value of education and not necessarily public school education but the value of having knowledge. I wonder how you feel about that, what, what it means to have knowledge.

Tom: Having knowledge means, makes you equal. It makes you equal. Because you have to have knowledge to, you have to have knowledge to - - what’s the way to put this, to, to move on in life. ‘Cause if you stay just on, in one mind set, without anything new being taught to you, then you are not moving very far.

An influential leader in African American culture stands out here again as a role model to overcome experiences of oppression, inequality and promote advancement in education for young African American males. Tom’s experience in school appears to have been oppressive since he uses language such as “being equal” and “it makes you equal”. This example shows the lived experience of this student at school is unequal.
when compared to other races. His experience has always been trying to catch up or to prove that he is equal to the majority. He uses a lot of language that expresses that he must prove that he is equal. Tom uses an influential leader in the civil rights movement to motivate him to do well in school and to motivate him to gain new knowledge and awareness.

Tom’s passage gives one example of how oppression can motivate students to engage in academics. This student is determined to prove to society and doubters that he can achieve success and will graduate from high school. He uses the negative acts such as people stereotyping him based on being an African American male athlete to motivate him to excel and maintain good grades. This management technique can be effective as long as the negative emotions are managed through a positive outlet so that resentment does not build in this student. For the students who were interviewed for this project and experienced oppressive acts their identity, confidence and core values mediated the negative acts and feelings refocusing the frustration into a positive behavior that would produce positive results academically.

James shares a slightly different experience of what it has been like to be an African American male in public school. He experiences negative acts and thoughts from friends in school of his own ethnicity encouraging him not to do well in school. He shares his experience:

James: One of the things that made me realize that was seeing how many of my friends or, how many people of my own color who was actually sort of trying to pull me down, like that crab effect, you know? It was more African Americans not wanting to see me do good than it was white people. They get caught up in my only way out is selling drugs or, having a bunch of kids and being on welfare. I just feel like some people feel sorry for themselves.
The desire of his friends to join in their rejection of majority rule play out in this James’s experience of being a successful African American male in school. He is accused of what is known as “selling out to White culture” by doing well in school. This experience most likely caused a struggle with identity as well as belonging as his African American male friends were trying to bring him down or into the drug culture and his mentors and family were encouraging and rewarding his academic success. Belonging played a critical role in his academic success. James could have chosen to be accepted by his peers and could have ended up failing in school. James was able to negotiate this challenging period of his life by relying on family values and relationships and the school community to help him navigate his life to be successful.

These passages as well as those described earlier in this section, illustrate a strong message of the present effects of oppression in American culture. James describes friends who have surrendered to oppression and a learned helplessness. Oppression creates barriers that make it difficult to advance and often create a learned helplessness as experienced here. Learned helplessness or self-fulfilling prophecy does in one sense empower African American males into believing they are defying the White majority rule, but in essence it limits their opportunities and continues the power differential between majority and minority (Harper, 2007). He shares the example of many of his friends who do not see the importance of engaging in academics and choose counter culture lifestyles such as selling drugs. In the case of this James, he has not bought into the concept of learned helplessness through the support of his family and teachers, and strong core values he has learned from them. Instead he uses
the support and values he has come to believe to continue to advance him and his family in educational success.

Positive messages and experiences occur in many of their lived systems for the African American males interviewed that help create a positive self concept and belief in self that encourages academic success. Famous and personal role models are a key to overcoming stereotyped roles of African American males in school based on the interviewee’s experiences. Each student interviewed spoke of either implicit or explicit oppressive messages that they have encountered either in school, through social connections, the media or society as a whole. These students ability to successfully navigate through experienced oppression can be attributed to core values, a strong sense of self concept, famous African Americans who are successful, support from faculty or coaches, belonging to the school community, along with their own resiliency and determination to be successful in life.

**Extracurricular involvement**

Extracurricular involvement was another subtheme supported across all interviews that promotes belonging in the school community. Whether sports, clubs, student government or band students interviewed expressed the importance that extracurricular involvement played in their academic engagement, belonging and success. Each student shared that one critical aspect of being involved in an extracurricular activity is that a minimum grade point average was required in order to participate. Having to maintain a minimum grade point average encouraged students to do well in school due to their passion or love for the sport or organization they participated in at the school.

The second common theme within the subtheme of extracurricular involvement across the interviews was that sports and clubs created a sense of belonging to the
school. Students shared that being a part of something outside of academics made them feel like they were a part of the school community and increased their sense of belonging. Students described that by feeling like they belonged, they took more pride in their work in the classroom and several expressed the importance of being a role model within the school.

Stevie expresses in the following passage the benefits and skills participating in student government have on his success in academics and positive development of self-concept. His experience illustrates the importance of belonging and feeling part of school community by being involved in an extracurricular school activity. Feeling a sense of belonging helped Stevie to become vested in his education and increased his academic engagement being provided the opportunity to participate in something he was passionate about.

Stevie: I think what helps me is being involved within the school. I think what really helped was when I joined student government and that really showed me that first year of like, how important it is you know, students feel. Like, they’re proud of something. You know, when you put on events and stuff. And doing that, relating that towards my academic success, it was seeing something that I feel like I can do in the future time, then I need to put myself and dedicate myself to my academic work just as well as my SGA work. And so, by doing something that I felt that I loved and that I had a passion for, it really just drove me to like, strive, to better myself and challenge myself as well.

Stevie describes a sense of accomplishment and increased feeling of confidence by successfully planning and holding events. This sense of accomplishment also aids in his belief in self, self-concept and sense that he can succeed. Additionally, Stevie describes the possible career paths that he could pursue based on his experience and skills practiced in SGA. This future orientation creates thinking in the present of what he needs to accomplish in the classroom to get to college or life beyond high school. He is
able to recognize the dedication to academic work and achievement necessary in order to meet goals in the future.

Stevie also discusses finding passion and love for something that he feels improves him as a student. He is describing engagement or buy-in of an activity at school that can help motivate him in the classroom. Creating fun at school or participating in a desirable activity makes classroom and academic time more manageable as it gives students something to look forward to each day or week at school. This desire or as the student puts it “drove me to better myself” demonstrates exploration and development of self as well as determination to be academically successful in school as it was a pathway toward a future career.

Jerry continues to explain the importance of participating in extracurricular activities in school and its influence on academic success. Jerry’s experience of belonging is expressed through his involvement in athletics at the school. He begins by explaining the structure the school has put in place to hold student athletes accountable in the classroom and its influence on his academic engagement.

Jerry: My sports have helped me. If, you know, there’s always some kind of qualification for you to play sports. You know, GPA, if your grade isn’t great. So, if my grades aren’t on point, I can’t play sports, and I love to play sports, so that’s something that always motivates me.

Again the minimum grade point requirement for students to play sports engages students in the classroom. Being involved in extracurricular activities illustrates the importance of helping African American male students find something outside of the classroom, yet within the school community where they can be involved. Being involved in an activity also creates a sense of belonging to the school community. Jerry’s true love and passion is sports. His love for sports motivates his performance in the
classroom. He knows that if he does not have the required grade he will not be able to play. He continues to explain how sports influence his performance in the classroom.

Jerry: Right, it’s kind of like you’re trying to get to something but you have another thing that you love. And just to have something for you to express yourself in, I think also helps you be creative, and it helps you to improve in school ‘cause it, it’s not all about school sometimes. Sometimes it’s about doing things that you like. But in the game you have to balance it out. Balance as in school is gonna always seem like work, and stuff that you don’t want to do, but they have other extra, activities you can do after school, like you know, sports. By you doing those fun things, it’ll help you find fun things into education so that you won’t think that it’s all work. That’s like the main goal.

Jerry continues to describe another important piece for his success, which is creativity and expression. Creative expression and having the opportunity to be creative helps with his balance and ability to be academically successful for Jerry. He speaks of balance and suggests taking breaks from schoolwork allows his mind to rest, refresh and recharge so that when he revisits his work he is alert and able to re-engage in his studies.

A main concept that arises from Jerry’s passage about extracurricular activities and its correlation to academic success is finding fun in school. There are activities at school that are fun. By making school fun throughout parts of the day the academic periods are bearable. Having fun while at school also encourages the students sense of wanting to go to school to participate in activities they find rewarding as described by Jerry. Jerry describes how he joined the school community and found a sense of belonging by finding activities he was good at and enjoyed doing at school. It helped keep him engaged in his core academics.

Again involvement in sports is an experience shared by Tom that helped him become academically successful. Tom as other students realized that in order to
participate in basketball, his passion, he had to maintain a minimum GPA. Tom also speaks of the importance of being involved in an activity during the afternoon hours when school releases for the day. Tom shares how participating in an afterschool activity kept him off of the streets and away from a “street culture” that could have led him into a life of criminal activity and drugs.

Tom:  Well, I’ve seen a lot of friends not putting their mind into schoolwork and them falling off and into the streets or um, going to jail and stuff like that. That made me realize that I don’t want to live that path in the future so I decided to put more into schoolwork and try to make more out of myself than just a average kid. When I found out that in order for me to play sports, what I love the most, I had to um, to, to have good grades in school.

Tom described wanting to do well in school and to be successful though he observed his friends going to jail and getting in trouble and he decided he did not want to take that path. He chose sports to stay engaged in school. Not only does he have to perform in the classroom to be eligible to play on the court, but he was also expected to attend afterschool weight trainings in the off-season, as well as practice and games during the season. Having supervised afterschool time reduces the chances of African American males participating in drugs and criminal activity (Noguera, 2005; Woodland, 2008). This student’s choice to play sports minimizes his time spent on the streets with his friends who, according to him were not making good decisions. His passion for sports helped steer him away from possible negative outcomes associated with street life and hanging out in the afternoons.

James experience in athletics is similar to Tom’s story. James mentions the skills and values that football taught him. He was able to learn discipline, work ethic and the importance of being a role model at school and in the community.
James: Football taught me discipline, work ethic and being an athlete, they really put you on a pedestal and they really stress being a role model. It was just that incentive to make good grades so that I can keep playing and being in practice. Working out kept me off of the streets and put me in contact with a lot of respectable people that was going to try to shape me into a decent person you know. A lot of my friends were staying out late. And a couple of my friends were out but you know I was studying or, home, tired, 'cause I had practice all day so I wasn’t really around all that. My friends were doing drugs, alcohol, trying to be a gangster, hanging out with a bunch of different crews, just getting involved in bad activities. A lot of my friends, they were hanging out with older guys, doing what they thought was cool. They ended up breaking into people houses, just doing like, stuff like that.

Two paths for at-risk students are again illustrated in this passage. Belonging in either group was an option for James. However, due to James love for sports he chose to play football. By choosing to participate in a school sponsored sport James was held accountable for his grades, found a positive environment to belong to and also gained exposure to positive mentors. The skills James developed due to football had an impact on the development of his self-concept and also made him believe in himself.

Through mentoring and coaching he started to believe that he could be somebody and he was taught how to be a contributing student to his school. This case illustrates the character and confidence building that team sports offers in addition to setting standards for academic success based on minimum GPA requirements for eligibility. James mentions that being coached by respected people who taught him discipline, work ethic, being a role model and shaping him into a respectable person contributed to his success in the classroom. Males in general and young African American males in particular can benefit from this type of mentoring. Participating in extracurricular activities creates opportunities for students to become involved in the school community, to learn valuable life skills, and to develop character and values, all while reducing unsupervised afterschool time which often can lead to crime related activities.
James as Tom shares about the lifestyle path his friends chose which led them to gangs, drugs, and criminal activity. He continues.

James: Yeah coaches and stuff - - depending on the person, you really do get a lot of core values from football, you know? It’s like egg-headed people, a lot of people who are really egotistical, that, all about me, all about I, but there’s a lot of values and things you can learn from just being involved in a team sport, you know, that if you look for it, you’ll find it.

Having caring coaches who used core values of character in their coaching of football helped this student learn right from wrong. He mentions in his interview that his only male role models in his family were his uncles and some were good and some were bad. For African American males who do not have positive role models in their lives team sports can be a place for students to learn many core values and the necessary skills to become accomplished students and citizens. This student found football as a place that taught him discipline and focus, which he was able to transfer into the classroom and into his character during the school day. It also created a family as he describes in the following passage.

James: Like I said out of my friends that don’t have parents they are there, so they get caught up in the whole, nobody loves me, that type of stuff. Find somebody to love you. You know you’ve got friends, you know, I love you. Why you gotta hang out with those guys and do that stuff, trying to fit in? Get on the football team, and get another family. Football, basketball, running track, doing drama, it’s like I’ve got a family away from family. I’ve been playing sports since I was like eight years old. My mom, my grandma, don’t have to come to one game. I’ve got people that come to every single one of my games if I ask them to. I made a lot of friends, a lot of my friends’ parents really act as mentors for me. I’ve just met a lot of people that, you know, care about me.

James raises the point that family does not have to be biological to be considered family. He expresses in this passage the family and support that he was able to find by participating in organized sports. Sports have taught him many life skills and values in addition to keeping him off the streets. The lessons that he has learned on the field
have helped him become a role model to others in addition to being academically successful in the classroom. He suggests a viable alternative to street life if students are willing to participate. His message articulates the positive impact that non-academic school involvement can play in the development of young adults encouraging engagement and success in the educational system. He also speaks of how it prepares students for futures outside of high school. His passage lends insight to the importance of providing outreach to at-risk youth who may not have advocates to encourage participation in non-academic school activities. Based on the reports of the students interviewed in this research, recruiting students, but especially African American males to become part of the school community will help promote belonging and improve academic success.

**Involved educational personnel**

Principals, teachers, school counselors and coaches can have a significant impact on the academic success of all students. Educational personnel can have an even greater impact on marginalized populations such as African American males by encouraging academic success and inviting them to join the school community as expressed by students interviewed. Many males who participated in the interviews discussed the value that being noticed in school had on their academic career. Most shared the power that being “believed in” gave them which encouraged them to engage in learning. In addition to increased belief in self, students also felt belonging to the school community through relationships with educational personnel as experienced across the interviews. For some as will be reflected in the forthcoming passages the willingness of educators to take extra time, see potential in them or show authentic empathy for their lives created critical turning points in their academics.
Jimmy begins to explain the importance of having a caring adult in school:

Jimmy: In middle school I was a hard head, going to be this, going to be that, and a teacher opened up my eyes and he told me that I had potential to be somebody but I just wasn’t doing it. I know I can do the work, or I know I can get good grades and do this but I just wasn’t doing it. He didn’t understand why. I was really trying to be cool at the moment and then he had meeting with me. He didn’t have to, he could’ve just quit, but he had a parent meetings. It hurt me to see my grandma sitting at the end of the table at the parent meeting. And she’s sitting there and I don’t understand why he’s like this. He just kept pushing me and then that made me go - - that opened up my eyes and made me kind of change my whole perspective of what I was doing, so.

Teachers possess a strong influence in adolescent’s lives to encourage or discourage. This teacher saw the academic potential Jimmy possessed despite the “acting out” or “being cool” which often creates disturbances in the classroom and can be difficult for educators to see as identity struggles for these youth. This teacher in Jimmy’s life invited Jimmy to become part of the school community. Teachers like this one can be the catalyst that helps males break through the media stereotypes placed on many African American males in school. This student discussed earlier that he was wearing low riding pants and portraying the rapper image while in middle school. True genuineness and caring for all students by the teacher presented an opportunity for change for this student. The influence of his grandmother and the teacher helped this student to turn the corner and engage in learning. This student is now on track to attend college in the fall. Teachers have the power through persuasion and encouragement to reach even the most difficult students and create positive change.

He continues:

Jimmy: And then he started talking to my grandma about it during meetings, and I’d be sitting at the end of the table like he’s wrong and I’m right. But in reality, he was right. He’d tell nothing but the truth. I couldn’t even really look up at her, and look at her in the eyes ‘cause it kind of hurt - - it hurt her real bad. Then I just, it started turning around. I got my grades back.
up. He told me that he knew I could do it. And he told me don’t let it just stop, keep doing it, ‘cause you’ve got potential to be somebody, and he just stayed on me. And that really opened my eyes ‘cause a lot, a lot of people didn’t really stay on me. A lot of people gave up on me. To this day, there are a lot of people like that—gave up.

This passage explains the link between family values and educational personnel, along with illustrating the importance of creating genuine connection with the family. This teacher knew this student could achieve in the classroom and called a meeting with his caregiver to discuss what he saw as potential. The meeting was not to discipline the student or to talk about how the student was a disruptive child in the classroom, but to explain that this student could achieve and to encourage engagement in academics. The teacher believed in the student and was working to build an alliance in the home to help empower the student to be academically successful. The teacher also wanted the student to feel belonging to the school community, that he had support at school. Growing up in a family that encouraged doing well in school it became hard for the student not to think about engaging in academics. The bridge from school to family was a successful strategy for the teacher to help this student improve his academics.

This teacher also believed in Jimmy when others did not. Some teachers do not either have the time or they become frustrated with students such as the one sharing his story. As he explains “a lot of people just didn’t stay on me… a lot of people gave up on me.” This aligns with hegemony and many experiences of African American males in schools. As students go unnoticed they begin to believe that no one cares and may “give up” on school, since they feel they can never be as good as their White counterparts. Jimmy’s story illustrates this perception. Until his teacher showed interest and saw ability in Jimmy he had assumed the role expected of him by the stereotypes
and prejudices he had encountered in his lived systems. However, a teacher was able to see ability within this student and believed in the potential academic success of Jimmy. This relationship and belief bestowed from the teacher to the student helped this child turn the corner in his academics. The student felt invited to positively participate in the school community.

Jimmy shares the positive effect a caring teacher has on a disruptive student that can be successful in school:

Jimmy: Well, me and that teacher, he was pretty cool, but he was also kind of awkward, kind of weird. He ran his classroom different from the other people but he was a cool guy. I’d come to class, I’d sleep or I wouldn’t do my work and make jokes, crack jokes, and he’d pull me to the side and I’d be smart back and say something dumb, say something stupid and make everything worse. Then he started talking to me after class, and ask me why I was acting up. I was doing it in more classes too but none of my other teachers really had an impact on me like him. They didn’t say anything to me until the meeting, but he was the main reason why the meeting was, ’cause he called for it.

The true compassion for teaching illuminates in this passage. This teacher went out of his way to mentor Jimmy and showed this student that someone cared about his academics. It became a big turning point and had a significant impact on Jimmy four years later when he reflects on things or people who made an impact on his educational journey. It began with a belief from the teacher that this student could achieve success regardless of the color of skin, cultural dress, or “acting cool” in class. This teacher could have just seen Jimmy as another troublemaker and this student’s outcome may have been quite different. This teacher played a key role in Jimmy’s approach to learning and valuing his education by taking time to build a relationship with him and his family. This teacher invited an at-risk disruptive African American male to become a part of the school community and embrace doing well in school.
Jimmy explains his perception of what a teacher should be like:

Jimmy: A lot of teachers are just like, I quit. If they think you’re a hard head, ‘cause I’m pretty sure they get a lot of them, they just give up. They won’t give you chances, they won’t work with you. I guess some of that’s understandable. They go through it a lot, through a lot of students each year, but then again, as a teacher, I feel that they should be a mentor to you, like that teacher. Teachers should be more of a mentor and not putting you down, ‘cause it’s not good seeing anybody fail. You want everybody to succeed, even though if it doesn’t go that way, but that’s what you want.

This student raises an important point from his perspective. Though it is difficult to reach all students how do teachers look beyond messaged stereotypes through our media, former troubled students, burnout in the classroom and implicit or explicit prejudices? As described earlier many African American males assume roles that oppression has created in the classroom. They often feel inferior and can fall into a learned helplessness or counter cultural identity in an effort to maintain their pride damaged by experienced prejudice, discrimination and racism experienced either at school or in other lived systems.

Through establishing teacher student relationships, African American males feel that they belong within the school community. Jimmy’s illustrates this sense of belonging. When his teacher reached out to him in eighth grade it helped him realize that he could succeed and that education was important. It helped him believe in himself and created greater opportunities in this student’s future.

Jerry shares his experiences of his educational journey, providing examples of caring and supportive educational personnel that encouraged academic success.

Jerry: My educational journey. I found support in some of my previous principals. My teachers of course. They’re in your life every day, so you have to like, have good support from them. You’re not going to be around your parents all the time. But outside of home, I would have to say my principals and my teachers, and friends. All my teachers somehow see something in me
and they always encourage me and they always want me to do better, and they always push me. And if they don’t then that lets me know that they don’t see nothing in me and that’s worth fighting for, but I see in myself.

Jerry received the same support and praise from teachers, though he had never been a difficult student to work with in schools. What is unique in Jerry’s experience is that he realized the value of building relationships with principals and teachers early on in his high school career. He took initiative to create relationships with faculty and staff at his high school, working to create bonds at his school that would provide him with support on his academic journey. Again, messages of encouragement and belief are salient in his experience and the simple feeling that someone else believes in him helped create academic success for this African American male. He attributes a great deal of his academic success to the fact that his teachers saw potential in him and pushed him to succeed.

Again, Jerry raises the importance of building a relationship with each of his teachers in the next passage. He explains the value that he has found in building working relationships with his teachers. He believes that if he had not been able to establish a working teacher-student relationship he probably would not be on track to graduate.

Jerry: Next to the parent, a teacher is right there to having a good relationship. Because the parents try every day, just as teachers do every day. They interact with them every day. You’re going to spend hours with these teachers. The least you could do is get to know them and find out things about them that you never knew. I think if I hadn’t had a good relationship with any of my teachers I would be struggling right now. I think I probably wouldn’t have half of my credits. I probably would’ve just been a failure. And that’s not something I want on my agenda, or to-do list.

This student is different from Jimmy in that he was able to see the value of creating relationships with his teacher. Instead of waiting for teachers to engage him he
engages teachers and works to build relationships with them. Messages passed from his family about how to succeed in school and his initiative establishing relationships with teachers created support and investment in his education that produced success in school. He establishes good relationships with his teachers, which help him become part of the school community.

Stevie shares his positive experiences with caring educational personnel:

Stevie: My guidance counselor saw that I could potentially do AP and to challenge myself a little bit more. My first semester of it really put in perspective, it’s challenging but I could do the work. It was the first moment where I felt like I was pushing myself, like I was really giving myself a chance to accomplish something. She was like, you know, you want it and you’re challenging yourself to be in these classes. Now, she also said, if next year you didn’t want to, that’s fine. At least you know that you tried. So having my guidance counselor there to guide me through my academic success was one of the most important things and that’s when I really started, you know, to ask for help.

Stevie found encouragement from a school counselor. The school counselor recognized the ability of this student and encouraged Stevie to move beyond his fear or doubt and try to succeed in AP classes. This extra push of encouragement from the counselor gave the student a belief that he could do the work. The counselor has built rapport and a relationship of trust with this student. Stevie honored the counselor’s opinion and belief that he could succeed.

This particular counselor did his or her job by acknowledging the potential in Stevie and pushing Stevie to see his own potential. The counselor was able to recognize the student’s lack of effort and pushed the student to be honest with himself and the counselor. This led to heightened awareness of the student that he was not really doing the work and his decision to put forth more effort in the course. The hard
work paid off. The relationship and rapport that the counselor built with the student helped the student achieve academic success.

At the end of this passage the student acknowledges the impact that the interaction with the counselor had on him. He realized what a big turning point it was for him and that it was okay to ask for help. The counselor believed in him which created some sense of confidence in his ability to do the work. Although it is unclear whether the counselor worked with the student to teach him how to ask for help, Stevie’s ability to ask for help may have arrived from the confidence he acquired when he knew the counselor believed in him.

Tom explains in this next passage the true caring of students experienced at his school, especially in the fact that this student faced expulsion from the school. Faculty of the school could have dismissed this student, yet the faculty decided to work with this student empowering this youth to make better choices and be academically successful.

Tom: My principal, my tenth grade year, when I got into some big trouble at school. I could have been in jail for, for years, for a long time for this. He and a couple of other teachers, and staff members all got together and they were talking and about a month later I got back to school, that's when he started coming to me, talking to me more, trying to see how I'm doing and trying to see what I'm trying to do for next year. He's a good mentor in high school for me because he always tries to keep me on track and tries to make sure that I'm doing all right and not falling behind in any way in school.

The importance of supportive educational personnel is again evident in Tom’s story. This story speaks volumes, and though the details surrounding his “big trouble” are unclear, school faculty saw something in this student and gave him another chance to succeed. Upon returning to school, the principal of the school became a mentor to Tom. It has left a lasting impact on Tom’s educational journey and experience at his high school. The faculty of this school were able to see the potential of this student and
the at-risk environment outside of school this student experienced. Instead of giving up on Tom, the faculty with the principal leading by example mentored this student. When the “big trouble” incident occurred Tom was receiving fourteen referrals a year. After daily interaction, and building strong principal/teacher-student relationships this student has not had a referral in two years and is going to graduate on time with his peers. The student experienced the support of a caring adult at his school who genuinely cared about him. It made him realize that he could succeed. It also made him feel a part of the school; it gave him a sense of belonging.

Principals, teachers, school counselors, coaches, custodians, and other adults in school can have a great impact on the lives of the students they interact with on a day-to-day basis. Through these interviews it becomes evident that the relationships created with personnel at the school have a significant impact on the student’s sense of belonging in the school community, it increases students’ belief in self and reinforces the idea that they can succeed, and it increases the belief the student is not alone in their academic experience. These students’ expressed comfort in the relationships with their teachers created a similar comfort when asking for help and working harder in the class. Encouragement also is a key finding within this theme. Encouragement helps grow belief in self, which produces increased esteem, and confidence that leads to academic success.

Finally, educators who create a bridge toward welcoming minority families into the school community can foster a positive school environment that encourages success in students as is evident in the story of the students interviewed. Minority families often feel intimidated by the school community. Creating and building relationships that
promote belonging and acceptance can build bridges of additional support in the family and community (Smith, 2009). Building relationships with the family and community can contribute to student engagement in academics.

Community

The theme of community support and outreach was supported in all but one interview conducted. Five students expressed that they received support from the community in various ways whether from neighbors, a church community, or general community due to athletic stardom. Some students were involved in community outreach programs such as Take Stock in Children. The students who participated in this program discussed the impact the community outreach program had on their academic success and future orientation. These students also make suggestions to make programs like Take Stock in Children more accessible or inclusive to more severe at-risk students that may not be succeeding academically in school.

Take Stock in Children is a community outreach program that recruits disadvantaged minority students who maintain a certain GPA in school. The students are selected to participate in the outreach program which holds the students accountable to maintain a certain level of academic success, be crime and drug free, maintain good behavior in school, stay in school and meet with an assigned mentor once a week. The student is exposed to postsecondary opportunities including college visits, career development and choosing a career path that matches their interest and skills. Students who maintain the minimum requirements and graduate from high school are awarded a scholarship to attend a four year university or college or attend a trade school. The program also holds parents or caregivers accountable by coaching and encouraging the caregivers to become advocates for their children by imitating and
maintaining relationships with school personnel including, but not limited to teachers, administrators and coaches.

These students voice the impact that these programs had on helping them with future orientation and engaging in their academic careers. The students who participated in the outreach programs expressed a real need for developing programs that do not target high-achieving students, but low achieving at-risk students. As will be reflected in the upcoming passages some feel a greater emphasis should be placed on students who are failing in middle school or early high school to help engage these students and promote academics.

Community support

Jon reflects on the community support he received from the church community that he attends with his family. He discusses the impact that the congregation has on his academic engagement, specifically the influence praise had on him and how it developed his self-concept and belief in self, which led to academic success.

Jon: It’s mainly my church community because I’ve always gone to church with my grandma, and you know, they’re older there. And they would instill values. They would tell me that you have to work hard. I know they’ve gone through a lot of hard times ’cause they’re old and they’ve seen a lot of things. They tell me life isn’t always easy and I have to work hard… When I was a kid I used to love praise I used to love when people tell me, oh you’re so smart, so I guess that would help me go the extra stretch and do a lot of things, pretty much, yeah.

Jon receives messages from his church community that lead to positive outcomes in his academic success. He receives messages of encouragement and reason that hard work will pay off. These messages appear to become internalized as he has discussed in the family values section how he knows if his grandma or members of church can work through hard times he can as well. The church community also creates
a space within this student’s lived systems where praise and encouragement motivate the student to believe in himself and give him an extra push to do well in school.

Jerry reflects on the influence community support has in his academic success. He shares his experience of community support received in his neighborhood. He shares messages that he has received from his neighbors emphasizing the importance for African American males to complete high school.

Jerry: Nowadays, a lot of communities are advocates for black males. They realize that a lot of kids are dropping out of school, and not going to school, and they want to change that, adults realize that we are the future and it starts with us. Whatever we want to do now is what’s going to happen in the future. I have neighbors all the time who ask me about school, how’s it going, keep up the good work. A lot of neighbors, who support sports here, support the school. So I think nowadays a lot of families and a lot of people in the community are wanting change.

Community involvement and awareness of African American males’ struggles in school is a concern for this student’s neighbors and community. Jerry reports that neighbors are aware of the current crisis and provide support through encouragement of doing well in school or through attending sporting events. Again, having neighbors and community members who support African American males creates a sense of belonging, and the belief in self and that others care about the welfare of the student is vitally important. Jerry articulates that community members want “change” which is interpreted as bettering their community through improvement of graduation rates and academic success for African American males. Jerry continues to describe what it feels like being a senior and having community support.

Jerry: It feels great. It feels like anything is - - anything is possible. Like, anything you want to do and put your mind to it and work at it, it can come true and you, I mean, you’re going to go through barriers, but it seems like there’s no - - no major barrier that you can’t go through.
The presence of neighbors interested in this student’s academic success invites this student to believe that he can achieve success in academics. Involvement of the community and interest in this student’s academic welfare encourage Jerry to perform well in school, not just for himself, but for members of his community. The sense that Jerry has community support in his athletic and academic endeavors create increased confidence in self, work ethic, and the ability to navigate difficult times. Community support fosters success in academics. When African American males feel supported by their neighbors, positive role models in their community it increases feelings of self worth, esteem and belief in self (Woodland, Martin, Hill, & Worrell, 2009). These individuals realize their ability to be successful.

James continues to build on Jerry’s theme of the importance of community support. James experiences community through his involvement with athletics. James describes his experiences being a star athlete on the high school football team. A link between school involvement and community support is observed in the experience of this student. He shares the connection of being involved in a school-sponsored program and receiving support from educational personnel and encouragement to succeed in school from community members. James’s experience of having community mentors has had positive impact on his academic success and engagement.

James: Yeah, playing - - with me, with like playing sports. You get a chance to meet a lot of people, people who see you’re trying to do good, so they take notice of that. People really give out their helping hand for people who show that they want to do something, they want to help themselves. I’ve got people that come to every single one of my games if I ask them to. You know, I just - - I made a lot of friends, a lot of my friends’ parents really act as mentors for me. I’ve just met a lot of people that, you know, care about me.
Sports have provided a medium to promote academic success not just through GPA minimum requirement to participate in athletics, but also through exposure to the community. Community members get to know this student athlete and follow his career, providing support on and off the field. Support for James ranges from the school community through his counselor to family and friends who reside in the larger lived community. He expresses the fact that individuals in the community care for him, which boosts esteem and confidence. Feeling supported creates opportunity for this youth to succeed academically. He is able to seek out support when needed and is not alone in his academic journey. Sports not only provide a physical and emotional outlet, but also provide an opportunity to gain exposure to the community. Through athletics this student established networks and mentoring opportunities in his community. Caring community members creates opportunities for youth to be encouraged, inspired and groomed toward becoming contributing members to society.

**Community outreach**

Community outreach and support can capture students’ attention and help direct students to possibilities postsecondary in addition to encouraging academic success while in high school. Jon shares his experience of participating in Take Stock in Children. This program helped Jon to begin to think about possible career paths, opportunities after high school and the possibility of attending a four year college. Jon describes his experience participating in Take Stock in Children.

Jon: I guess they just picked from a selected group of students that do well in school, eighty honor roll, 3.0 GPA, and we went through an interview, and then they picked me as a scholar, for their scholarship. I was in middle school. I didn’t really feel the weight of it until I got into high school, and like, wow, where am I going to go to college? I started looking up universities online, because my grandma was saying, you should look for a university. So I found Full Sail University in Orlando. And I'm like, wow,
that looks pretty good. And went to the college tour, and it’s a pretty cool college. It’s pretty cool.

This passage expresses the interdependence of systems, family values coupled with community outreach, in this student’s lived experience and how the culmination of influences inspires future orientation and academic engagement. The Take Stock in Children program provides a springboard for Jon to begin exploring possible postsecondary career paths. The program targets minority youth at a critical time, during middle school, providing a foundation for possible opportunities after high school. The timing of the program is critical for adolescent development in addition to the high stakes of grades and academics as these youth approach high school. By exposing these youth to collegiate campuses, campus lifestyle, classes and environment it inspires academic engagement and the determination to do well in high school based on the possible future after high school.

Jerry shares his experiences of community outreach programs. He shares the positive experience and impact on academics having African American mentors and participating in a program that promotes excellence in education and character had on him. He also talks about PALS which is a program that provides mental health and support for students who struggle in high school. PALS workers provide consultation and counseling services directly on high school campuses in this Southeastern community. He shares that being able to create bonds with mentors or community outreach workers encourages students to think about life after high school while providing immediate support and encouragement for students to do well in school.

Jerry: And, also once you find yourself doing better and finally seeing that you can make it and you can find other people who may be struggling and find other people who might not believe that they can, and what I do like about our school now is that they have different clubs or organizations that
comes, like Pals. A couple of years ago, we had Iota Youth Alliance, and it was a mentorship for young black, African Americans as well. And so, by having those type of organizations at school, it’s another way of having support having another bond with someone coming and supporting and giving you different aspects of life and opening your eyes to the opportunities that you couldn’t have and that you never thought that you could do.

The power of outreach programs such as Take Stock in Children, PALS and Iota Youth Alliance creates hope in potential life possibilities and fosters believing in self. Another vital role that outreach programs play in promoting the academic success of disadvantaged youth is grouping similar students together, which shows students they are not alone in the process. Jerry expresses how it was helpful to see that he was not alone in his academic journey by meeting likeminded students who shared many similar characteristics of upbringing and academic potential. Not only do outreach programs like this create future oriented thinking, but they group students together which creates a support group that collectively will promote academic advancement.

Stevie expands on Jerry’s experience of community outreach agreeing with the importance of outreach programs, yet argues the importance of creating outreach programs that target students that do not do well in school. He feels programs that support more disadvantaged populations are necessary to expose students to life after high school while encouraging and promoting the importance of engaging in academics and successfully graduating from high school.

Stevie: I would like to see, in the future years, that we have more outreach programs that really doesn’t cap on educational requirement. ‘Cause some students who might not have that requirement may need help in another area and you help them build up to an educational requirement like, Upward Bound and programs like that. Those are programs that really help first generation and low-income housing. ‘Cause I did that for two years, and those type of programs really help because they gave you a sense of what I could be like with an education, and what you could accomplish with an education.
Stevie illustrates the impact that outreach programs had on his engagement in academics, possible opportunities that an education provides, and the belief that he will graduate from high school. What is unique in his story is that he suggests greater development in outreach programs that target greater at-risk youth. He states that he does not believe that there are enough outreach programs that target the struggling African American male, the student who is failing in school. He discusses the importance that his involvement in outreach programs had on him and that he feels there are not a lot of programs that target the severely at-risk populations. He continues articulating the importance of targeting severely at-risk populations.

Stevie: Really target kids that, that are struggling that may have the GPAs of 1, and that are just barely getting towards a 2. I feel as though that with some outreach programs, they’re just looking for those good students. Let’s focus on those who aren’t as much. And those are the ones that need the help. Those are the ones that are struggling, that are feeling that they have nowhere to go and they have no sense of belonging. I think we have so much dropout rates because there’s not enough opportunities for them. So I feel as though having more outreach programs like that, things like that, those really do help students in my opinion.

Stevie raises an interesting point. There may be very capable African American males who can achieve success academically, yet do not have the support or encouragement to engage academically Stevie believes. Stevie feels more community outreach should focus attention on the at-risk youth that are failing or just barely passing high school. As this student describes, these youth should be receiving the most attention. These students likely do not have any of the supported systems that have been discussed in any of the themes described herein. These severely at-risk students are often cast out into society to fend for themselves. Stevie shares that he believes that resources are limited for more at-risk populations. He suggests finding ways to develop and increase outreach programs that target African American males that are on
the cusp of dropping out. Outreach programs that foster support, encouragement, skill training, and values would create positive outcomes for these marginalized youth.

In conclusion, community support and providing community outreach are influential in fostering academic success for African American males. As described throughout this theme five out of six males have benefited from programs and interaction with community members mentoring and supporting their academic endeavors. Community support and outreach provide another important system that promotes academic success for at risk African American males in this study. Community support breeds belief in self, esteem and confidence. It also holds these students accountable as members of their community are watching them, supporting them and expecting success from them. Though these students are independently responsible as their self-concept has developed, the community can create supportive dependency by holding these students accountable to academic success through the expectations set for them by their community members.

Summary

Six African American students shared their lived experiences of being academically successful in high school in this study. The analysis suggests four main themes that empower these youth in their academic journey and successful completion of high school. Family values, identity development, belonging and community support all encourage successful academic achievement for these young men. Each theme suggested in analysis fosters academic engagement and success for these African American males. The themes identified are experienced across students lived systems and impact academic engagement and success.
Family values provided a foundation for students interviewed to begin exploring the importance of engaging in academics. Students received messages and support across family settings. Grandparents and single mothers shared their experiences with students and emphasized the importance and value of education while teaching and encouraging core skills such as work ethic, motivation, determination and self respect helping students engage in academics. Modeling and mentoring also emerged from family values as students were able to experience uncles, aunts and cousins in their lived systems. Students shared the value older generations had on their motivation and engagement in academics and helping students believe that they could achieve. Students appreciated having mentors within their family they could talk with, gain knowledge and experience about the importance of education, going to college and opportunities an education brings for African American males.

Self-concept, the second most salient theme, was critical in the academic success of African American males interviewed. Positive self concept will be discussed in Chapter 5, as students shared it contributed to their academic success. Students reported being comfortable in their own self-image influenced their academics. Asking for help, belief in self, and confidence all emerged as a result of having a positive self-concept, influencing academic success. Students shared how family dialogues and interactions with mentors had influence on their development of self-concept. Students described by having a positive self-concept the worry about “being cool” in school subsided. Dialoging at home with family members about developing positive character traits and self-respect encouraged positive self concept growth. A positive self-concept
influences academic engagement and supports academic success as experienced by students interviewed.

Belonging was the third most salient theme experienced by participants and is supported across three subthemes: African American male identity, extracurricular involvement and educational personnel. Belonging to the school community encouraged academic success as shared by students interviewed. Students expressed the importance of feeling a sense of belonging and how it encouraged their willingness to perform in the classroom. Many students shared how sports gave them something to look forward to in the school day, while for others it was elective classes, or organizations and all shared the value having a positive relationship with an administrator, teacher or coach had in facilitating their growth as a student and their academic success. Students expressed by feeling apart of the school, and being supported by caring adults in the classroom or an extracurricular activity it increased their belief in self, self-concept and own academic self efficacy.

The last theme that supports and encourages academic success for at-risk African American males is community. Community was broken into two subthemes: community support and community outreach. Students gained confidence, belief in self and also were held accountable for their actions in and out of school as well as the extracurricular activity they participated in at school. Students shared community members helped foster belief in self that they could achieve academically as well as creating a sense of duty to do well in school to make their community members proud. Community members were defined broadly and included the church, neighbors and broader community members that attended athletic events and school related activities.
Community outreach was also found important in supporting academic success as reported by students. Students shared that community outreach helped students jump start their thinking about life after high school and the possibilities of attending college. Students also shared that outreach programs provided mentoring which helped students establish positive role models encouraging engagement in academics. The outreach programs also helped teach students basic skills that improved engagement in the classroom supporting academic success.

Chapter 5 will provide theoretical and integration of results. Chapter 5 will discuss these findings in greater detail exploring the independence and interdependency of these themes. Recommendations will be made to continue the empowerment of young African American males, while discussing limitations and future directions for research.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this investigation was to understand where positive messages are received in African American males lived systems and how these messages contribute to academic success and advancement in higher education. The study attempted to identify a set of core components that promote academic engagement, opportunity and success in school for at-risk African American adolescent males interviewed. The investigator will discuss key factors that promote academic engagement and success as experienced by African American males interviewed. This study identified the value of strong positive role models in the community and their impact in the lives of young men who struggle and are at-risk of adjudication and academic failure. By sharing the lived experiences of at-risk academically successful African American males, this study highlights important factors that encourage academic success for African American adolescent males.

Through the discussion of results, implications for practice are shared to build on current practices to empower at-risk African American boys to be academically successful in public school. This Chapter 5 includes a brief introduction, discussion of results, practice implications for counselors, future recommendations for research, limitations and conclusion.

Discussion of Results

Four main themes emerged that can empower at-risk African American males to experience academic success in high school. The four most salient themes found
across the interviews were family values, self-concept, belonging and community support and outreach. Each theme possessed subthemes.

Family values expressed by the participants included single parent mother encouragement, extended family encouragement and experiences of role modeling from extended family. Each theme appeared to promote values of work ethic, valuing education, determination, self-respect and drive encouraging engagement in academics.

Positive self-concept was broken into two subthemes: development of self-respect and a healthy identity, and development of belief in self and confidence. A positive self-concept developed skills of introspection, ability to take control of one’s actions, self-respect, confidence, and self-esteem that supported academic success for students interviewed. Positive self-concept helps students develop skills to be comfortable in their own identity, manage peer pressure and stress while valuing the importance of education.

African American identity, extracurricular involvement and involved educational personnel contributed to the understanding of the importance of belonging for African American males’ academic success in school. Students shared how belonging created both positive and negative outcomes based on the group the student chose to join. Students discussed how pride in their cultural heritage impacted their engagement in academics. Positive African American role models encouraged students to persevere in school, giving them hope that they could do well in school. Exploration and acceptance of their racial identity helped students find belonging within their family and school community. Extracurricular involvement also promoted belonging, showcasing students’
talents providing opportunities to establish relationships with peers and involved educational personnel. Finally, educational personnel supported belonging by providing authentic interactions with students who made students feel that someone cared about their academic success and supported them in the school community.

Community involvement was the final theme that emerged from the interviews conducted. This theme was conceptualized into two subthemes: community support and community outreach. Community support is defined by support given to students in the greater community where the students resided. Community support was found in students neighborhoods, church community, Boys and Girls Club, and caring adults that resided in the greater community and interacted with students due to their presence in sports or extracurricular activities. Students all shared their experiences that caring adults in their identified communities had on their academic engagement. Caring adults whether experienced in family, school or community systems fostered belief in self, confidence and a sense of pride that created a sense of duty in students to do well in school.

Community outreach is defined as programs that are federal, state or privately funded that target at-risk populations providing opportunities to expose students to opportunities postsecondary. Community outreach provided similar results for students, and also helped students begin thinking about career paths and life after high school. Community outreach exposed students to positive mentors and experiencing elements of college. This exposure to college life excited students to think about possibilities postsecondary, which as students shared encouraged them to do well school and become successful academically.
Family Values

The theme of family values support academic engagement and success for students who were interviewed. Family values included work ethic, self-respect, drive, motivation and honoring the family as expressed by students interviewed. Students’ interviewed relayed the positive impact that their mothers, and extended family members have on their success in school. Students also discussed how positive support from family members encouraged greater belief in self, fostering academic success in school.

Showing involvement, support and caring about a child’s academics help increase the value of education for that child (Gutman & McLoyd, 2000). Praise and encouragement, from parents, supports academic success, whereas criticism, doubt, and disappointment expressed from parents appears to disengage students from academics (Gutman & McLoyd, 2000). Previous research, along with the findings of this study, help explain the positive influence parents can have by talking openly with students about their academics, and by providing encouragement, and genuine care and concern for the student. Students recognize the praise from family members who encourage them, and say that it helps them believe that they can achieve academic success in addition to making their family proud.

Single parent mother encouragement

All but two students interviewed resided in homes where the primary caregiver was identified as the mother. Students shared that though their mothers worked and were often tired their mothers always made time for them to discuss their schoolwork. All mothers were low SES who instilled values of a strong work ethic as well as the value of education and the opportunity it can afford their children. An involved and
supportive African American parent concerned in the academic success of their students confirms Smith’s (2009) findings that single parents and low SES parents do want their children to succeed academically. Smith (2009) suggests that working class African American caregivers motivate their children through their own narrative. Students expressed their mothers “stayed on them” to do well in school, expressing tough love. These students appreciated that their mothers were present in their lives.

**Extended family encouragement**

This study’s interview data revealed that grandparents frequently served as a primary source of support, encouraging African American males to do well in school. Past generations, as experienced in this research, share their shortcomings in education to encourage academic engagement. For example; some grandparents shared their experiences of segregation, and discrimination not to discourage, but to encourage students to pursue an education and value the opportunity afforded to them. These passed-down stories and family duty or honor emerged as a theme, and served as a catalyst motivating African American males to engage more fully in academics and achieve greater success.

Encouraging adolescents to become responsible, independent learners fosters autonomy and increases students’ self-esteem and confidence as expressed by students’ voices in the research. Students talked about feeling empowered by the encouragement to do well in school and the freedom to make their own decisions with regard to academics even if their choices were not always correct. Having such freedom to make choices promoted autonomy and independence for these African American males, helping to build confidence and basic skills to be successful in school. When caregivers share the value of education, drive, and responsibility students are likely to
develop similar attitudes (Snodgrass, 1991). Sharing core values of the importance of education, work ethic, and responsibility increases the opportunity for success, while reducing discipline problems in school (Bennett, 1986; Snodgrass, 1991).

**Experiences of modeling from extended family members**

Students were able to experience both positive and negative life experiences from their extended family members regarding life choices. Again, having positive caring adults in the lives of at-risk African American males is critical in encouraging academic success. Uncles and cousins served as both positive and negative role models for these youth. Students were able to experience the reactions from family members when their uncles were involved in criminal activity versus uncles who were successful. Seeing family members make poor choices in life helped them stay away from criminal activity. Additionally, having positive role models in the family was important as they looked up to these figures and modeled their behavior after successful role models. Figures such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins serve significant roles in shaping African American males, fostering academic success in school (Murry, et al., 2001). Messages sharing the value of education and mentoring are important in developing self-concept and encouraging academic engagement for African American males in school (Graham & Andersen, 2008).

**Developing a Positive Self-Concept**

As young African American males navigate their lived systems they encounter many obstacles socially, economically, and environmentally that place them at-risk of failing academically (Vail, 2004). The ability to navigate the many obstacles experienced in daily living for the interviewed African American males begins with the ability to develop a positive self-concept and belief in self. Students across interviews explained
that as they were able to gain confidence and esteem, they began to believe that they
could achieve academically in school. Students shared that thinking they could be
successful in school led to saying they could be successful in school. This finding is
supported by a study by Woodland et al. (2009), who also found that when students
receive support and encouragement they are able to increase confidence and self-
estee that fosters the belief they can do well in school. Belief in self from the students
interviewed lead to engagement and action in the classroom where the outcome was
successful academic achievement in school.

**Development of positive self-concept versus false positive image**

Belief in self and a positive self-concept helps individuals develop a healthy
identity (Erikson, 1968; Gale, 1974). Not only do many minority males struggle with
basic identity development, but minority males must also manage racial identity
development in their teenage years. Experiences of oppression can be distressful,
stunting racial identity development and creating negative academic outcomes for many
African American males, especially if no support or encouragement is provided in their
lived system (Gordon, et al., 2009). Mentors and caring adults can help minority males
by engaging youth in dialogue developing a healthy racial identity to foster positive self
concept thus supporting academic engagement (Gordon, et al., 2009).

Adolescence is often a critical developmental period where many teenagers
struggle with role confusion and establishing one’s identity within society and culture
(Erikson, 1968). Adolescence can become a time of confusion, where fitting in and
“being cool” becomes important in an effort to establish a false positive self-image for
many teenagers, as was shared by the African American males interviewed. A false
positive self-image is described as emulating perceptions expressed in pop culture and
mass media that are often not representative of one’s culture or true identity (Jackson & Dempster, 2009). As expressed by interviewees, “being cool” created a false sense of identity and compromised academic achievement and postsecondary opportunity. Students shared their own experiences along with watching friends who chose “being cool” over doing well in school. Students’ friends who created a false positive self-image instead of developing a positive self-concept experienced problems with academics and many turned to gang life and selling drugs. Parents and educators need to help students understand the dangers that personal image and social acceptance can have on academic engagement and success. Parents and educators can take action by talking with African American males helping them develop a positive self-concept. When African American males are comfortable in their own self-concept they are more willing to engage in academics despite negative stereotypes of being academically successful as a male (Graham & Anderson, 2008; Pollack, 1998).

As Jimmy shared in his story, he worked to personify popular rappers by his dress and assumed negative attitude toward teachers creating problems for him at school and disengagement in academics. Jimmy’s teacher and grandmother reached out to him and helped him develop a positive self-concept. Experiencing the encouragement and support of caring adults helped Jimmy create his own concept of self that was more positive. He discussed that his love for rap music still existed, though it did not overshadow who he was as a person and what he hoped to accomplish in life. Again, family values along with establishing a sense of belonging in the school community enabled this youth to develop a positive self-concept, which encouraged academic achievement in school.
Many male students struggle with image and identity, often compromising engagement in academics for being socially accepted by their peers (Jackson & Dempster, 2009). Many boys who do not develop a positive self concept become susceptible to cultural stereotypes that reward boys for “acting out”, or “being cool” in school, looking down on academic success or viewing academic success as a feminine quality (Jackson & Dempster, 2009; Pollack, 2006).

**Positive self-concept and belief in self**

Developing a positive self-concept and belief in self from the support and encouragement gained from experienced lived systems helped to build confidence and esteem for the young men interviewed in this study, thereby creating engagement and success in education. As their confidence and esteem increased these young men began to realize the importance and value of education and took measures to engage in academics. However, engaging in academics can be a risk for many African Americans as it can create discomfort for many in their peer group who view such engagement as “selling out to Whites”. However, students with positive influences cultivate belief in self and self-respect that develops a positive self-concept which then enables them to overcome possible rejection or ridicule by their peers. (Bandura, 1986; Leonardi, 2007). Students begin to value academic success and future opportunities over being socially accepted (Leonardi, 2007).

**Belonging**

The importance of belonging is explained across three subthemes: African American male identity, extracurricular involvement and involved educational personnel. Each subtheme illustrates the importance belonging plays in making students feel that
they are a part of the school community. Students interviewed explained, belonging to the school community encouraged their academic success.

**African American male identity**

Implicit and explicit forms of oppression and prejudice still exist as described by students interviewed. Stereotyped messages of African Americans transmitted through media and society create assumed positions in the classroom and school environment (van den Bergh, et al., 2010). Additionally, if an African American male does not experience a sense of belonging in the school community he is more likely to fail in school (van den Bergh, et al., 2010). Students interviewed overall stated that teachers and administrators did not explicitly show favoritism to White students compared to them, though each shared an experience of perceived oppressive acts in the school environment based on stereotypes of dress or image, being an African American male athlete, or simply being an African American male.

Some students discussed their impression of African American male students in general and their perception that many African American males expected someone else to do the work for them. From an African American male perspective, such an expectation or the feeling of “why try” can be explained by historical hegemony experienced in school (Goodman & West-Olatunji, 2010). A learned helplessness or self-fulfilling prophecy has already been put in place due to historical messages and media persuasion of oppression. Many African American males simply do not believe they can achieve success in school and when coupled with traditional stereotyped media influences and masculinity these students find greater acceptance being the class clown for example, instead of challenging the norm (Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Martino, 2000).
Some students experienced both of these social issues, yet were able to avoid these self-fulfilling prophecies of African American males and perceived traditional masculine roles in school by having family, school and community members interact with them. These members from the students’ lived systems taught and shared important cultural values and heritage, which helped develop an appropriate racial identity. By developing a positive racial identity at-risk African American males that were interviewed were able to establish a sense of belonging to the school community, thus improving the chances of academic success.

Unfortunately, overcoming obstacles of historical oppression is still evident in the lived experiences of the youth interviewed as many refer to “wanting to be equal” in their academics. Being equal implies barriers or obstacles these youth must overcome to achieve equality. Such feelings of not being equal or experiences of prejudice can impact both psychological and emotional development (Jenkins, 2006). Feelings of inadequacy may be experienced by African American males who do not have family support, role models, or encouragement in academics. Students who do not have adequate support may consequently struggle with identity, turning to counter cultural activities, participating in criminal activity, and joining gangs to experience belonging (Jenkins, 2006).

Conversely, positive African American role models and family members help African American males develop a positive self-concept, embrace their racial identity, and become academically successful as experienced by the students interviewed. Additionally, caring adults from African American males lived systems can improve esteem, work ethic, belief in self, and confidence. One of the keys to developing a
positive self-concept is engaging these youth in conversations about their racial identity helping them embrace, understand and accept their cultural heritage (Graham & Anderson, 2008). African American males who are exposed to and can identify with successful positive African American male role models are likely to believe that they too can be successful (Grossman & Bulle, 2006; Mitchell, et al., 2008).

As experienced in the interviews, students found inspiration from a variety of sources Grandparents, cousins, uncles, famous civil rights leaders, and coaches helped them successfully manage negative experiences in school. Having role models aided in the development of self-concept and determination to overcome struggles experienced by at-risk African American males: thus influencing academic success in school.

Modeling, mentoring, and coaching build self-esteem, confidence and belief in self which can tear down oppressive beliefs and produce academically engaged and successful youth (Gordon, et al., 2009; Kolar & McBride, 2011). It is important for educators and family members to help African American males understand and develop their racial identity (Gordon et al., 2009). Racial identity development and reaching the stage of internalization will help in building confidence and esteem where students focus on achieving success in school for themselves and not competing to be equal to their White counterparts (Gordon, et al., 2009).

**Extracurricular involvement**

Being involved in extracurricular activities at school accomplishes many things for African American males. It creates a sense of belonging to the campus community increasing students’ engagement in the classroom. Participating in an extracurricular activity involves maintaining a minimum GPA that holds students academically accountable. Finally, participating in a school related activity makes students more
visible to faculty, and community members who may provide support and encouragement to excel in academics.

Students interviewed discussed the value that becoming a leader and role model within the school community and lived community had not only on their academics, but also on building self-esteem and confidence, thereby promoting greater self-concept and belief in self. Faircloth and Hammer (2005) suggest, “Students are most likely to be motivated and successful in contexts in which they have a strong sense of relatedness and community within the learning environment” (p.306). Engagement in extracurricular activities for at-risk youth fosters socialization with peers, holds students accountable in the classroom and promotes a belonging to the school community (Knifsend & Graham, 2012).

In addition to formal extracurricular activities, students interviewed mentioned the importance of finding things throughout the day or afternoon that are enjoyable at school. Finding things throughout the day or afternoon that promote positive feelings and thoughts creates a better outlook on attending school, engaging in core curriculum schoolwork and overall opinions of school as shared by students. When individuals experience more positive experiences versus negative experiences in their lived systems they are more likely to participate and successfully manage their environment (Hanson & Mendius, 2009). This was true for students in this study, as they were able to find fun things to participate in at school, which made going to school enjoyable.

**Involved Educational Personnel**

Involved educational personnel made a difference in the lives of students interviewed by showing genuine encouragement and care about students’ academic success while creating belonging within the school community. Teachers who build
relationships with at-risk students increase the students’ perception of belonging and acceptance in the classroom influencing students to engage and be academically successful (Uwah, et al., 2008). Similarly, they experience an increase in academic competence and belief in self, which again, supports their academic success (Uwah, et al., 2008). Students interviewed bought into the value of a high school education when teachers and administrators established relationships with them making them feel accepted and noticed in the school community. Teachers’, who show caring attitudes for all students create an inviting climate that promotes student involvement, and motivates learning, while fostering stronger critical thinking skills for students (Wiggan, 2007).

It takes strong mentors and caring teachers to build alliances with disengaged and suspicious youth to encourage engagement in academics. Jimmy’s interview reflects this experience for at-risk African American males. Because of lack of engaged parents, as well as strong negative media and social influence, doing well in school tends to run counter to everything African American males value in their adolescent years (Sheely & Bratton, 2010). Positive affirmations and encouragement are critical in the positive development of adolescent males (Gutman & McLoyd, 2000). As described by students interviewed positive messages from teachers and administrators about their work and abilities creates confidence and belief in self. As students begin to believe that they can accomplish the work they become more willing to do the work, which leads toward greater achievement in school (Wiggan, 2007). Creating positive relationships with involved educational personnel is one factor that encourages academic success for at-risk African American males (Maylor, 2010).
Community Involvement: Support and Outreach

Community support and outreach provides additional support for at-risk youth, helping youth to begin planning for the future early in their high school career. Community involvement played an integral part for students in this study by holding students accountable for their academics and character outside of the home and school community. Students expressed the value of being noticed in the community either by neighbors or organized groups. They discussed how it increased their levels of confidence, belief in self, development of positive self-concept, and willingness to do well in academics. Students also felt a duty to honor or please individuals in the community who had supported them by performing well in school. Support from the community to students interviewed added value to the importance of education, and sense of belonging thus increasing engagement in academics.

Community outreach programs that provide mentoring opportunities inspired at-risk youth who were interviewed to do well in school. Mentoring provides youth with someone to look up to and to model their behavior after (Choi & Lemberger, 2010; Gordon, 2009). Mentoring programs also instill hope for disadvantaged youth increasing their self-efficacy and belief that they can do well in school (Choi & Lemberger, 2010; Gordon, 2009; Woodland, 2008). Youth interviewed expressed the value of interacting with successful African American adult males who look like them, act like them and who were successful. These mentors, especially those who come from colleges, inspired youth to succeed and opened students’ eyes to numerous opportunities within education as expressed by interviewees. Additionally, mentoring programs build positive relationships with at-risk African American males that appropriately support students’
social and emotional development that lead to greater academic outcomes (Mitchell, et al., 2002; Woodland, 2008).

Lastly, community outreach programs helped the students interviewed with future orientation. Students stated that outreach programs such as Take Stock in Children afforded them an opportunity to think about possible careers and attending college after high school something most students had not considered was a realistic option for them. Students explained that programs such as Take Stock in Children instilled hope and a positive outlook for their future, which inspired them to work hard in school. Outreach programs help students to see the value of education and consider possible career paths and opportunities that can encourage academic success. Students are better able to see the purpose of learning and doing well in school when they can see a variety of postsecondary opportunities.

Theoretical Implications

Black Racial Identity

Students who were interviewed all appeared to have reached the internalization stage of Cross’s Black Racial Identity Theory (1971). Students exhibited acceptance with their own racial identity, levels of confidence, and comfort with their ethnic identity and ability to accept other students’ worldviews. Each student interviewed had experienced and successfully negotiated one or more acts of prejudice, racism or discrimination and some expressed relying on strong leaders from the African American community to gain the strength to persevere. Each student expressed key support from family members and discussions with grandparents, aunts, uncles or their mother about their cultural heritage instilling values such as self respect, overcoming obstacles, and embracing their Blackness.
According to Helms (1995), who adapted Cross’s work, when individuals reach the internalized stage they have developed a positive racial self-conception, self-esteem, and confidence. Being able to free oneself beyond the constraints of racism and oppression creates space to focus on other issues in African Americans lived systems (Vandiver, et al., 2001). Students interviewed were aware of oppression and racism that still existed within their lived systems, but by having caring adults to help them navigate experiences of oppression in their lives, they were able to increase self respect, confidence and greater mental health. Students shared that discussions with family members helped create positive self concepts along with self-respect. Students stated that belief in self, identifying with their cultural heritage and family support helped manage racial situations that arose at school.

Exploring racial identity in African American males’ lived systems, whether home, school, or community influences personal ethnic identity, wellness, and academic self concept (Woodland, et al., 2009). Exploring racial identity with adolescent African American males increases cultural knowledge, and self esteem, creating greater opportunities for academic engagement (Woodland, 2008). Discussions with caring adults for African American male students that embrace African American cultural ideals will promote positive identity development and wellness for these youth (Woodland, 2008). Exploring positive aspects of racial identity creates a sense of pride and helps transition these young men into adulthood reducing the likelihood of risky behaviors such as crime, drugs, and substance abuse (Watts, Abdul-Adil, & Pratt, 2002).

Ecological Systems Theory

Ecological systems theory guides the understanding of at-risk African American males’ academic success through the independence and interdependence of their lived
systems. Individual, social and system experiences interact and influence one another creating either benefit or harm for the individual (Pierson, 2011). The meso systems identified in the study were family, neighborhood, community, school community, and outreach community programs. Each system contributed to the success of these students independently, and interdependently.

The family system is critical in understanding the success of the interviewed at-risk African American males. The multigenerational family system provided a solid foundation of support for students creating core values such as work ethic, determination, self-respect and motivation to do well in school.

Messages from caregivers that existed in multigenerational family systems were also expressed across students’ school community, neighborhood, and larger community systems. As students interacted in some or all of these identified systems, similar themes, such as support, encouragement and praise were experienced sculpting their concept of self, confidence and belief they could do well in school.

Each meso system is unique in its own way providing support, empowering students and increasing their self-efficacy. For example, the school community helped students build confidence and esteem while they learned new skills in clubs, organizations or participating in athletics. The school community helped develop a sense of belonging by deconstructing barriers or feelings of inadequacy for being a minority student by having students feel like a part of a team. Engagement in a community makes an individual feel a part of the community, which in turn encourages investment of that individual within the community (Albanesi, Cicognani & Zani, 2007).
School community expands to community neighborhoods as students participate in athletic events or school events. Individuals from around the community come, witness, support, and encourage students to do well in the sport or club, but also encourage students to do well in academics. After the events community members may see the student outside of the event and in the community, and several students described this in their interviews. When individuals from the community showed genuine interest in the student’s academics, community members connected with students, creating a belief in that student, and fostering pride and willingness to engage in academics. Having caring adults in the lives of at-risk African American males can therefore improve academic success (Gutman & McLoyd, 2000; Woodland, 2008).

Finally, community outreach provided both independent and interdependent support promoting academic success for the youth interviewed in this study. The outreach program provided encouragement to students helping students engage in academics and thinking about possible career paths and postsecondary opportunities. Community outreach was an additional source of support for students interviewed creating an interconnected system of teachers, coaches, school counselors, and supportive family members, where students were able to receive positive messages about education from multiple sources and caring adults.

Using ecological systems perspective is an effective way to investigate success factors for individuals. It encourages the investigator to explore where both positive and negative messages are received and identify positive and negative messages that relate to academic achievement to help the researcher explain the phenomena. Additionally, from a counselor’s perspective, using the ecological systems perspective
helps identify where students may be struggling and may require assistance. The experience of these students’ multiple systems explains the influence of positive experiences and engagement that caring adults can have on at-risk youth. The results of this study suggest that each system in the lives of students interviewed impacted their development of self-concept, possibilities in life and academic engagement. For students interviewed in this study, positive experiences with caring adults in their lived systems impacted their academic development and opportunities.

**Implications for Counselors**

When working with at-risk minority populations counselors can use an ecological systems perspective as an assessment tool to investigate where students are receiving positive and negative messages. This study suggests that creating a welcoming school environment and encouraging extracurricular involvement leads to feelings of belonging and engagement in academics as experienced by the students interviewed. All students expressed the value of participating in school-related activities and how participation increased engagement and academic success. Students shared the value of having positive experiences throughout the day and in the afternoon, which helped them stay focused to perform well in their core classes. School counselors especially, could use these findings to encourage at-risk African American males to engage in an extracurricular activity at school.

The experience of having a caring adult in the school was supported by students in this study. Students expressed that having a caring adult present during the school day influenced their desire to perform well academically, increased self-esteem and belief in self, along with fostering the exploration of possibilities after high school. This finding supports previous research by Maylor (2010) which suggests that
compassionate teachers who have knowledge and pedagogic skills that help the student grow developmentally, and academically will also increase the students’ confidence and self concept to help improve academic achievement. Students who feel they belong to the school community are more likely to be successful in school (Uwah, et al., 2008). Schools and educators can continue to advance curriculum promoting culturally responsive instruction. Additional training could be provided to increase awareness of the negative consequences of “white privilege” for educators to increase the chances of encouraging African American males to engage academically. Culturally responsive educators can help at-risk African American males feel accepted in the school increasing their sense of belonging to the school community (Maylor, 2010; Uwah, et al., 2008).

School counselors identifying and engaging at-risk African American males and encouraging academic engagement, while offering counseling sessions to establish rapport and express interest in the students’ academic endeavors could improve these students’ success in school. Counselors and teachers who are able to establish a rapport and trust with disadvantaged youth will help students increase their academic self-efficacy (Uwah, et al., 2008). When African American students feel invited to engage in the classroom it helps create a sense of belonging which influences academic achievement (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005). Faircloth and Hamm (2005) also suggest that belonging within the school community best explains the relationship between motivation and academic achievement. When students feel a part of their school community they are more likely to do well in school. Counselors, teachers and administrators can help at-risk students in the school community by inviting them to
participate in the classroom, clubs, organizations or sports. As students find a place within the school community they experience a sense of belonging and academic success is more likely (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005).

Outside of school, mental health counselors can use ecological systems theory to help empower clients and the disadvantaged populations they serve. Being aware that positive interactions and experiences can encourage students to succeed in school is important in promoting success for disadvantaged youth. Mental health counselors can also help empower families by sharing the importance of valuing education and encouraging their children in their academics since positive encouragement from parents predicts academic achievement (Gutman & Loyd, 2000). Counselors may need to teach parents new ways to discuss the importance of education and highlight the immense influence their positive feedback can have on their children's academic success.

Mental health counselors can also empower at-risk disadvantaged youth by encouraging community involvement. Counselors can help students find positive environments such as mentoring programs or the Boys and Girls Club where at-risk students are provided an opportunity to interact with caring adults.

Finally, this study demonstrated the importance having caring adults within the school community and the positive impact caring adults have on academic engagement for this sample of students. Students interviewed expressed that when they felt welcomed, invited or cared about, it created belief in self, and academic self-efficacy. Authentic interactions from educators will promote success, and when such interactions
occur in the school community students begin to believe they can succeed in school (Uwah, et al., 2008).

**Implications of a Positive Self-Concept for African American Males**

**Ability to Ask for Help**

Asking for help is another skill that emerged once a positive self-concept is established (Ryan & Shin, 2011). All students interviewed in the study voiced the importance of asking for help in the classroom. They expressed that feeling comfortable and confident gave them the courage to ask for help when needed. These students explained that if others thought less of them, or made fun of them for seeking out help in the classroom it did not affect them due to their belief and respect for self. This finding illustrates the importance of helping at-risk youth develop a positive self-concept as students described self-respect and belief in self helped students be successful in the classroom.

**Developing an Internal Locus of Control**

Finally, many students interviewed discussed being in control of one’s own actions. Students expressed that over the course of high school they had learned how to manage situational events and academic life knowing that they had control over their actions. They explained how they realized their actions produced outcomes in their life whether it was good or bad. This is known in the mental health field as having an internal locus of control. An internal locus of control is the perception that one has some control over the events in one’s life conversely; an external locus of control is the belief that one has little control over the events in one’s life (Greenberg, 2011). Locus of control is another important concept identified in the study, as many students interviewed believed their actions could produce possible desired outcomes in the
future. Many students shared that determination, drive and work ethic aided in their academic success. Academic success for these students is in part due to their ability to perceive that they do have control over their engagement in academics. Therefore, an important message for counselors expressed from interviewed students is helping struggling students believe that they do indeed have control and can take control to achieve success in school. Counselors can help at-risk youth by helping them understand the difference between internal and external locus of control and relate the concept to academic success. Helping students become more internally driven and motivated helps students become more autonomous, independent and self disciplined (Brooks & Goldstein, 2007).

**Limitations**

Due to the qualitative nature of the study findings are not generalizable. They are the experiences of six students in one school district in a southeastern community. These findings are unique to the individuals who shared their experiences lived within their communities. However, the major themes that were generated from the study could be used in future quantitative research working with at-risk African American males to investigate interactions between themes within lived systems in efforts to make the findings more generalizable.

The researcher was unable to regain access to the school to conduct a proper follow up of member checking. This is another limitation of the study. Packets were distributed with excerpts and analysis to all students that participated in the original interviews. Only four packets were returned to the researcher providing feedback from the researcher’s analysis. It would have provided greater trustworthiness to the study to have received all six packets of analysis returned to the researcher to ensure that the
researcher’s analysis was indeed what the participants intended on sharing with regards to their academic success.

Due to the nature of this study being a dissertation a team of researchers did not participate in the analysis of the study. Having a team of researchers could have improved the trustworthiness of the study by providing multiple perspectives when conducting analysis. When conducting qualitative research working with a team of researchers when conducting the analysis is another way to improve the trustworthiness of the study. Working on a team creates multiple perspectives when working to establish themes and enrich the data.

Access to high schools was also another limitation of the study. The researcher had a difficult time gaining access to conduct research in the public school setting. He intended on interviewing at three high schools in the community and could only gain limited access to two schools. One high school would not return calls or respond to emails to allow the research to be conducted. This raises an important concern for higher educators to create and establish positive alliances within the school systems where their university resides. The research conducted in this study is valuable to educators in secondary education, but without proper access and re-entry to the schools it limits the voice and findings of the study. This again is a limitation of the study, but can provide insight to educators on the importance of building alliances with secondary educational personnel. Building alliances within researchers designated communities creates opportunities to improve access and engagement in education for disadvantaged populations. It also creates a systemic network where teachers and
administrators have access to resources that can empower the student populations they serve.

**Future Recommendations for Research**

A follow up of a quantitative study would be appropriate exploring interactions between themes and their influence on academic success for at-risk African American. Providing a quantitative follow up study determining how significant an impact the themes described in this study have on academic success would be beneficial to the field to present more generalizable findings. It seems that lived systems play an important role in either engaging or disengaging at-risk African American males to be successful in school. A next step of research from this study would be to examine a national data set to interpret and understand how systems interact and influence academic success for African American males. Specific factors that could be examined in a quantitative follow up could be using family values, positive self-concept, racial identity, extracurricular involvement, educational personnel, and community support examining their independent and interdependent interactions and if they influence academic engagement and success for African American males.

Additionally, it would be beneficial to interview single parent mothers of at-risk African American males to understand their experiences and impact that they have on their children. Interviewing single parent mothers of this identified population would help educators experience and understand their experiences, hardships, and support they give their children. It would be beneficial to identify the strengths and weaknesses that exist within the family system. By identifying these strengths and weaknesses educators could create community outreach programs that help empower these families and promote academic success.
Finally, a follow up study investigating the impact that extracurricular activities has on at-risk African American males’ engagement in the classroom is recommended. Does being an athlete make it easier for these males to perform in the classroom? By being an athlete does it make it easier to be accepted by their peers and does it carry less of a stigma as being termed “Nerd” in the classroom? It would be interesting to understand how being an athlete mediates students’ academic engagement and removes the worry of being thought of as feminine or a nerd for excelling in academics.

**Conclusion**

It takes an entire community and a community experience to help encourage and support at-risk African American males, according to the findings in this study. Academic belief, engagement, work ethic and self-concept began with family and expanded outward as students experienced various lived systems throughout their academic career. Lived systems experienced in students lives can either encourage or discourage engagement in academics. This study’s findings reveal that support is experienced across settings bringing truth to the saying “it takes a village to raise a child”. Lived communities as were the case in this study provided a positive place for students to develop and experience belonging. Family values, belonging, community support and outreach all helped develop a positive self-concept of students interviewed. Self-concept guided academic self-efficacy and encouraged academic success. When students are able to feel that they belong they possess greater self-worth and belief in self, which will encourage the student to be successful. Thinking about at-risk African American males from a systems model can help counselors and educators encourage and support academic success. It is important to understand at-risk African American males from a systemic perspective when helping these youth engage in academics.
African American males experience numerous obstacles and barriers that often deter success in academics. Using a systemic framework can aid counselors and educators to create a firm network, as experienced by students in this research that will provide positive modeling and mentoring, in addition to encouragement while producing results so that African American males do graduate from high school.

A systems framework is helpful in conceptualizing marginalized students as it can help identify systems where students feel alone or need support. Often, the school community is a place where students do not feel welcomed or feel threatened. When students are able to talk about this with counselors, counselors can provide appropriate interventions to help students engage better within the school community. Engagement in the school community will foster a sense of belonging for the student and belonging will, in turn, encourage academic success.
APPENDIX A
INFORMED CONSENT

Informed Consent for Factors in Educational Success of Achieving Students

I am a student in Counselor Education Program in the College of Education at the University of Florida where I am working on a research project examining the factors contributing to the educational success of at-risk high achieving African American male students. This project is under the supervision of Dr. Mary Ann Clark.

Participation in this project involves an individual interview with a doctoral candidate in counselor education that is collecting data for their dissertation. The interview will last for approximately 45 minutes at a location to be determined at your student’s school. There will be one follow up session once the study is complete to ensure that your student’s lived experience matches the findings of the study. The purpose of this interview is to learn about the factors that your student defines as important in their educational success and subsequent secondary educational planning.

With your permission, your student will be asked a series of questions that your student thinks may have contributed to your student’s educational success thus far in their educational journey. A copy of the interview is attached. The student’s privacy will be given the highest priority and the data will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. Interviews will be audio recorded. Steps to protect privacy will include: (1) disguising all identifying information asked for in the interview and (2) keeping all written records of the interview in a confidential file to be seen only by the principal investigator. Your student’s identity will not be revealed if they participate in this study. The data from these individual interviews will be studied and the principal investigator will explain the factors that appear to be influential in your student’s educational success in his dissertation. If you are interested you will be provided a copy of the findings from the study. Your student’s participation for this research project is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw your student at any time without penalty of any kind. Compensation will be awarded to your student for participation in this project and will be in the amount of a ten dollar visa gift card.

If you have any questions about this research project, you can contact Jason Orrock.

Although discomfort resulting from this interview is not expected, if there were any, it should be no more uncomfortable than your student telling their story or speaking openly about the student’s specific experiences relating to the student’s educational journey thus far. Being given the chance to share your student’s experiences may also have some positive effects. The results of this project will be used to share with educators who may be able to positively encourage students to strive for higher education. Additional benefits could include school and community programs designed to support and promote academic achievement and success for adolescent African American male students. However, students do not have to answer any questions they do not wish to answer and they may withdraw from the interviewing without penalty.

I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily agree to participate in the procedure and I have received a copy of this description.
Parent’s Signature  Date

Participant’s Signature  Date

Witness (Interviewer)  Date

Principal Investigator  Date
Informed Assent for Factors in Educational Success of Achieving Students

I am a student in Counselor Education Program in the College of Education at the University of Florida where I am working on a research project examining the factors contributing to the educational success of at-risk high achieving African American male students. This project is under the supervision of Dr. Mary Ann Clark.

Participation in this project involves an individual interview with a doctoral candidate in counselor education that is collecting data for their dissertation. The interview will last for approximately 45 minutes at a location to be determined at your school. There will be one follow up session once the study is complete to ensure your lived experience matches the findings of the study. The purpose of this interview is to learn about the factors that you define as important in your educational success and subsequent secondary educational planning.

With your permission, you will be asked a series of questions to understand what may have contributed to your academic success thus far in your educational journey. Your privacy will be given the highest priority and the data will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. Audio recording will be used. Steps to protect privacy will include: (1) disguising all identifying information asked for in the interview and (2) keeping all written records of the interview in a confidential file to be seen only by the principal investigator. Your identity will not be revealed by participating in this study. The data from these individual interviews will be used in the principal investigators dissertation to describe the factors that appear to be influential in your educational success. Your participation for this research project is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time without penalty of any kind. Compensation will be awarded for your participation in this project and will be in the amount of a ten dollar visa gift card.

If you have any questions about this research project, you can contact Jason Orrock.

Although discomfort resulting from this interview is not expected, if there were any, it should be no more uncomfortable than you telling your story or speaking openly about your specific experiences relating to your educational journey thus far. Being given the chance to share your experience may also have some positive effects. The results of this project will be used to share with educators who may be able to positively encourage students to strive for higher education. Additional benefits could include school and community programs designed to support and promote academic achievement and success for adolescent African American male students. However, students do not have to answer any questions they do not wish to answer and they may withdraw from the interviewing without penalty.

I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily agree to participate in the procedure and I have received a copy of this description.

Parent’s Signature

Date
APPENDIX C
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions

1. What do you think contributed to your academic success in school when compared to your other friends that have not been as successful in school?

2. What has helped you stay on track to graduate with an advanced or standard diploma?

3. Can you describe the characteristics of Black male?

4. How does being a Black male influence or inhibit your success in school?

5. Who or what has made you feel proud about being a Black male?

6. Have you ever experienced negative feelings with regards to an interaction with the public education setting? Can you describe your experience? What could be improved in the educational setting so future Black males would not have to experience this?

7. Who specifically has encouraged you to achieve success with regards to your education?

8. Looking back over your educational journey where have you found support? Can you briefly describe how these experiences impacted you?

9. How has spirituality influenced your academic success?

10. Have you found your community helpful in valuing the importance of your education?

11. Did you have a mentor that stood out that influenced your academic success? Please, describe this experience.

12. Is there anything else that has contributed to your success in school, be it a mentor, family member, church, community agency, teacher, that we have not covered? Could you briefly describe that experience to me?
APPENDIX D
INSTRUCTIONS FOR PARTICIPANTS IN MEMBER CHECKING

Instructions for Verifying Data Analysis:
Hi Gentlemen,
I ask you to please take a few moments and read through the packet of data that I have sent you. You will find enclosed in this packet excerpts from our interview that we had a few weeks ago. In your packet you will find excerpts that have been chosen to be included in my dissertation and later will be submitted for publication in an education journal. Please take a few minutes to read through these passages and analysis and PLEASE provide me with feedback if necessary.

Please, follow these simple instructions:

1. Read the excerpts and interpretations of findings – excerpt single spaced,
   interpretation double spaced

2. Does the interpretation make sense/do you agree/ is it the message you would want to send to educators/other students

3. If it is not, what were you trying to say? Please, write directly on this form or attach your comments on separate paper, providing feedback to make sure that your experience/message/view is expressed correctly

4. Return to office in sealed envelope to principal, scratching your name out and placing the following information on the outside of the envelope: For Jason Orrock UF Research Project

Thank you for your final assistance. The main purpose of reviewing your excerpts is to make sure that my interpretations match your experience. Thank you again for your support in this important research effort.
LIST OF REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jason Orrock completed his PhD in marriage and family counseling at the University of Florida. Jason earned his B.A. at Virginia Tech, and his master’s and specialist degrees in mental health counseling at the University of Virginia. He is a registered mental health counseling intern, intends to seek licensure in both mental health and marriage and family counseling, and is currently volunteering at the Children’s Medical Hospital in the adolescent clinic seeing individuals and families with the primary client being between 12 to 25 years of age. The hospital is part of the University of Florida’s medical school. He has been a special education teacher in public schools, has worked professionally as a home based therapist, and has had several intensive internships in mental health clinics, working with a variety of populations to include adolescents, adults and severe mental illness. Jason’s research interests have focused on the influence of perceptions of masculinity, as related to oppression, SES, and family involvement on the identity development, mental health and academic success of African American males. Thus, his work and professional interests focus on family, improving mental health and promoting wellness. He believes in a systemic model that builds alliances across professional settings including medical, community mental health and schools to promote greater wellness for disadvantaged populations.