A Dissertation

African American Males’ Ideas about School Success: A Research Study

by

Anthony L. Bouyer

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Doctor of Philosophy Degree in Foundations of Education

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An Abstract of

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Today, education is arguably more important than at any other time in history. With the ever-increasing rate of technological, scientific, and social change in the world, the right to a quality education must extend to all children. The overwhelmingly negative literature on low academic achievements of African American males has presented a hopeless picture of reversing long-standing trends of academic failure for African American males. This study employs a life history approach with narrative analysis, a methodological approach compatible with critical race theory, to oppose dominant discourse concerning the social and educational status of African American men in America. Specifically, a counter-narrative about African American males’ achievement is derived from face-to-face, individual interviews with five African American males who graduated from high school and are currently on probation for minor misdemeanor offenses. The research reveals African American males’ ideas about school and life success. The discussion proceeds in three distinct stages: first, an exploration of human rights in education; second, an analysis of the history of education relating to African Americans; and third, an examination of critical race theory as a framework.
Acknowledgments

This dissertation, which evolved out of my work as a probation officer for over twenty years supervising a mostly African American male caseload, has been nine years in the making. I would like to thank my family, friends and colleagues for their patience and support throughout. A few individuals deserve special mention.

My wife, to whom I have been married for 20 years and have been together with for 32. She has been an unwavering support and encouragement not only throughout my doctoral program, but as well throughout my master’s program. It was my wife’s unstinting faith in me and support of my educational goals that kept the fire lit to complete my dissertation.

My advisor, Dr. Lynne Hamer and other members of my dissertation committee, Dr. Mary Ellen Edwards, Dr. Renee Martin and Dr. Willie McKether. Dr. Hamer contributed enormously to my intellectual development and offered a wealth of suggestions on revisions of this dissertation.

My grandchildren, Donovan, Kalb and Alivia. It is important that they see the value of education and that they achieve the highest level of academic attainment of which they are capable.

Most of all, I would like to thank my dear departed mother and brother. My mother, for strong will and developing morals and values that shaped who I am today. My brother Ernie, whom we lost at an early age, was my role model and guided me through my first two years of junior college, introducing me to a world outside of the
projects. And my sisters, who have never lost faith in me and never judged me during these years of pursuing my academic goals.

I would also like to recognize and give a much-appreciated acknowledgement to UT’s Brothers on the Rise, who provided a grant so that I may complete my research. They are truly committed to their mission of retaining African American and Hispanic males in college and providing leadership for academic excellence to underrepresented groups on campus.
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Chapter One

Introduction

Based on my twenty-two years working as a probation officer with predominantly African American men, I have come to see that many—perhaps most—African American males do not see the value of *schooling* (which is not to say they do not see the value of *education*). Moreover, they do not see it as an effective tool for helping to improve their lives. As a social foundations scholar, I wonder if this might be because the school system is not designed to be of value to them and to serve their purposes. I call this a state of perplexity, that is, a huge and disturbing change from a history of African Americans’ valuing schooling as a key part of education and believing in school as key to improving self and society. Over eighty years ago, Carter G. Woodson (1933) warned that the “mis-education of the Negro” was preparing African Americans neither for lifting up themselves and their own people, nor for assimilating fully and successfully into White dominant culture and society. Thus the perplexity that is becoming too apparent to ignore now is perhaps the true fulfillment of what Woodson was seeing happen eighty years ago.

Tracing the history of education of African Americans, from slavery, through Reconstruction, and into Jim Crow, shows that African Americans during these periods had a strong commitment to valuing education and to understanding how they could use schooling to improve their standards of living. Provenzo (2009) stated:
Immediately following the Civil War in 1865, the Freedman’s Bureau was established to assist free slaves to find housing, paid labor, and medical care. However, education efforts produced the most successful results. Literacy rates among newly freed slaves catapulted from lows of 5% in 1865 to upward of 70% by 1900. (p. 26)

This Reconstruction era success in schooling was hand in hand with an increase in political and economic enfranchisement: African American men were seeing the promise of schooling and life success as working (Tozer, 2011). But by the 1930s, as Woodson pointed out, this advancement was in no way so certain: Woodson located the problem in the messages hidden in the curriculum that African Americans were inferior, and noted that schooling, from earliest grades through professional schools, prepared African Americans neither for entry into job markets nor for advancement in professions. And so now it seems that belief in schooling has worn thin, and it is perplexing that many African Americans—here I focus on African American males—have abandoned their formerly strong principles and values towards schooling today.

The number of African American males who do not graduate from high school has produced a plethora of research on variables impacting their academic success—or failure. The disproportionate amount of research in education emphasizing remediation and academic failure has created a belief that academic failure among African American males is inevitable. However, there has been little research on African American males who do graduate from high school and how they were able to achieve this academic success while facing many of the same challenges that their counterparts faced. Most of the research on African American males who have been successful academically has been
on those who have graduated from college. There is little research on the large numbers of African American males who have graduated from high school and who are successfully negotiating society outside of college. Focusing on African American males not graduating from high school, rather than focusing on those who do graduate from high school, takes away from understanding how the resilience and fortitude of those graduating from high schools can be used as research to help their counterparts.

Harper and Davis (2009, 2010, 2012, 2013) have produced studies on academic success of African American males, challenging the prevalent belief that there is no reversing longstanding academic failures of African American males; however, Harper and Davis’s work has not included how and why the successful African American males avoided the pitfalls and hardships that beset others in high school and thus enabled them to graduate from high school. Furthermore, Harper and Davis’s work has only looked at that segment of the population that is in college, rather than those who have successfully graduated from high school and are not pursuing college. The latter is of interest because while 34.3% of African American males have graduated from college, a greater percentage, that is, 47% of African American males have graduated from high school. Research on African American males who have graduated from high school and have pursued living life outside the campus setting would provide a more complete picture of African American males’ success, and could help us to devise ways to protect and provide support for more African American males to graduate from high school.

Towards this end, the current study uses a life history approach to collect the experiences of young, African American men who have graduated from high school and are successfully negotiating society, though in the very realistic and common situation of
being involved in the justice system as probationers. Using a life history approach places
the emphasis on the importance of presenting the individual’s subjective evaluation of his
experiences, involving his own account of his life. This approach has the advantage over
some other qualitative approaches in that it captures the young men’s analyses and
interpretations of the significance of particular life events and what they meant to the
young men themselves in terms of success. To complement the life history approach, and
in keeping with the critical race theory (CRT) that frames the study, as the researcher, I
have included autoethnographic accounts of my personal experiences throughout the
document. These personal accounts are italicized to set them apart. This lived
experience, along with research by others, supports my authority to write about this
neglected topic.

By focusing on this population, the study will suggest strategies to help larger
numbers of African American men graduate from high school. The study will examine
how and why some African American men are able to graduate from high school facing
the same social and economic problems their counterparts face who do not graduate, and
it will reveal, from the African American men’s point of view, what this means for their
success post-graduation.

**Statement of Problem**

African American men currently residing in urban areas of the United States
generally face negative consequences due to lack of education and disproportional
representation in the court system, which affects employment, healthcare, and criminal
involvement, ultimately leading to a series crises across the lifespan. The beginning of
these problems can be traced to the young men’s dropping out, or being pushed out, of school, in high school or even earlier.

From very young ages, African American males in the 20th and 21st centuries have found themselves at odds with society, and a large portion of African American males have found themselves struggling with the concepts of dignity, intrinsic value, and the structure of good human life. This phenomenon has been true throughout U.S. history, as will be discussed later, but it is particularly important to note it in the last four decades because we as a society like to believe that the “race problem” was solved in the 1960s and that we do not need to pay attention to it anymore. But it was not solved and we do need to trace the trajectory of race relations forward from the ’60s to make sense of the present. Indeed, Alexander’s (2010) argument that since the Civil Rights era a “new Jim Crow” era using mass incarceration has constituted mass discrimination may be applicable when looking at African American males’ chances for being successful in society at large, and successful in school in particular.

African American males’ attempted assimilation into U.S. dominant society’s notion of good citizenship has a trajectory that can be traced from the 1960s and President Johnson’s War on Poverty. During this time when America exploded with social unrest, it was young, uneducated African American males leading this social unrest, as African Americans demanded a quality of life that was afforded all citizens in the U.S. Thus, out of these demands came the War on Poverty. During the 1970s, America witnessed higher percentages of African Americans entering colleges and universities than in any other time in history, including the present.
I was a child of the War on Poverty, as I entered college in 1976; however, as I recall my days in elementary and high school, I now see how I was put in the same situations for academic failure as many African American males are today. I recall going to my guidance counselor my junior year in high school and inquiring about attending college. My guidance counselor stated to me, “Tony, you do not have the grades or the commitment it takes to attend college. You should try and obtain employment in one of the factories after graduation.”

Many educators, then and now, have held negative perceptions that can inadvertently or unintentionally discourage African American male students and can thus profoundly affect their not succeeding in school. Noguera (2008) talked about negative academic situations African American males experience related failure, not of their own making:

Throughout the United States, Black males are more likely than any other group in American society to be punished typically through some form of exclusion, labeled, and categorized for special education often without an apparent disability, and to experience academic failure. (p.xvii)

Noguera has made a compelling argument regarding exclusion of Black males from certain activities which also helped created an array of social problems: this exclusion constitutes punishment. During the War on Poverty, many Black males experienced an array of social and economic problems that impacted their ability for upward mobility. One form of exclusion, then and now, has been unnecessary placement in special education.
I was born with a perforated ear, and when I was in the first grade, I had several surgeries to correct this birth defect. Due to the surgeries, I missed many days of school from the 1st grade through the 4th grade, as I continued to experience medical problems with my ear. I was attending Fulton Elementary School in Toledo, Ohio, and because I was so far behind, I was placed in special education in the 6th grade. During the ‘60s, special education students were separated from other students and this carried a stigma. As I look back on this placement, I now know that I should have never been placed in special education.

Exclusion can be accomplished through negative forms, such as special education placement, or seemingly positive forms, such as being labeled as athletes. When African American males are labeled as academically challenged, this impacts teachers’ expectations, which affects motivation for academic pursuit by African American males. Even those labels intended to be complimentary, as in sports, can discourage academic success. African American males are stereotyped as being more athletic and better at sports compared to European Americans. African American college athletes may be seen as getting into college solely on their athletic ability and not on their intelligence. Sports coverage that highlights “natural” Black athleticism has the effect of suggesting White superiority in other areas, such as intelligence. The identifying and labeling of African American males can be traced back to slavery, as will be reviewed in greater depth in chapter 2. During slavery the emphasis was on strength to work coupled with the notion that slaves lacked intelligence to take care of themselves; this stereotype was perpetuated to justify slavery.
The literature on African American males and their exploitation in sports also supports the theories that athletics has contributed to negative images of African American males.

My lived experiences with racial stereotyping and exploitation of my athletic abilities began when I entered Libbey High School in Toledo, Ohio. I struggled with school, but I was one of the top athletes in both basketball and track, and felt that I would be a professional athlete, as many African American males thought, then and now. Growing up in the ’70s, I channeled all my time and energy into playing sports and spent little time on academics. I believed that if I were to become successful, then this success would come through becoming a professional athlete. My coaches at Libbey never dispelled or even challenged my belief that I would be a professional athlete, and because they never challenged me to think of other careers or push myself in other subjects, this impacted me academically.

According to Irving and Hudley (2008), research has shown that adolescents who devalue academic achievement more often direct their behavior to nonacademic pursuits (personal dress and grooming, athletic prowess, dating success) that may conflict with academic success (p. 679). There is a voluminous amount of literature on African American males’ fascination with sports as opposed to academics. Harper (2009) stated, “Many Black males are socialized to prioritize sports over academics when they are in high school, and such messages are sustained (and arguably amplified) once they enroll in college” (p. 30).

In my junior year at Libbey, November 1974, I was walking home from basketball practice and was hit by a car. I subsequently had to have two knee operations and missed
three months of school. During my time out of school, no one from the school came and
discussed my school work with me or with my mother, although my coach did bring me
an exercise bike. I wonder if this was done to help me return to my athletic form, and
wonder if he had any consciousness of ignoring my academics. I returned to school in
February, 1975 and, to my amazement, I was given all C’s. I thought that it was because
they cared for me and was glad, not knowing that this affected me academically, as I had
not done the necessary work to obtain the grades.

The next year, my senior year at Libbey, 1975-1976, I signed up for an English
honors class. On the first day of class, I was the only student of color in the class. My
teacher asked me in the presence of other students why I was taking this class, as he
believed that I was not prepared for an English honors course, and I dropped the class
with feelings of dejection. I may have not been prepared for the class; however, the
exposure would not have harmed me and neither the teacher nor I knew whether or not I
was prepared. Each level of my academic journey has been beset with challenges that
many African American males face today.

After the car accident, I was no longer the athlete that I had previously been. I
was fortunate to have had an older brother who was able to enter college during the
early ’70s. When I got back to school after the accident, my brother told me to forget
sports and concentrate on obtaining a college education. When I graduated Libbey, I had
a one-point grade average. My brother was a senior at Aquinas College in Grand
Rapids, Michigan, as he had obtained a basketball scholarship. I applied for admission
to Aquinas and was denied due to poor academic standing coming out of high school. My
brother helped me enroll in Grand Rapids Junior College. I attended Grand Rapids
Junior College for two years and, during that time, I had earned 48 credit hours. Thus my brother guided me into college and through my first few years.

When I transferred to Saginaw Valley State College in the fall of 1979, only 16 of those 48 credits were accepted: Thirty-two credits were remedial courses I had had to take due to a poor high school education.

The issue of race and sports in the U.S. is somewhat baffling in that many persons do not understand the negative condemnation associated with African American males and sports, and how this association has contributed to lower academic expectations of African American males. The typical theme resulting from such analyses is that African American males are physically superior, but intellectually inferior, to Whites. Further, such beliefs about physical superiority of African American males are closely yoked to an anti-intellectualism that permeates African American male culture.

The question of why African American males seem so directed to pursuing an athletic career is of considerable interest for this study. Seemingly, African American males who are in search of role models observe African Americans as successful athletes and entertainers on TV, but do not see or have contact with the disproportionally few who have succeeded in the professions or in the corporate world. Consequently, these youth commit considerable intellectual and physical energy to becoming professional athletes rather than to a variety of other occupations with which they have difficulty identifying. Thus one central problem that this study will address is the need for redirecting African American males’ negative beliefs about academic achievement to embracing academic achievement as a means of improving life quality for themselves, family and community.
Beyond the inordinate emphasis on sports, and consequent de-emphasis on academics, the images of African American males today from the media often show them as violent, and as non-human. Alexander (2011) offered an historical view of how disingenuous the dominant culture was in creating negative images of African American males:

Following the Civil War, it was unclear what institutions, laws, or customs would be necessary to maintain white control now that Slavery was gone. Nonetheless, as numerous historians have shown, the development of a new racial order became the consuming passion for most white Southerners. Rumors of a great insurrection terrified whites, and blacks increasingly came to be viewed as menacing and dangerous. In fact, the current stereotypes of black men as aggressive, unruly predators can be traced to this period, when whites feared that an angry mass of black men might rise up and attack them or rape their women. (p. 28)

Americans were reminded of this portrait of African American men, when Police Officer Darren Wilson, when interviewed by *Good Morning America* (2015), described how Michael Brown looked right before he shot him in Ferguson Missouri, saying, “Michael Brown looked like a demon, non-human.” According to Spring (2010), negative images of conquered groups go back much further than the Civil War, noting, “For early Christians, barbarian was synonymous with pagans and without civilization. Consequently, pagans or non-Christians were considered as less than human” (p. 3). As Riggs (1987) documented in the film *Ethnic Notions*, the dominant culture has consistently crafted images of African American men to meet current needs: first, as
“Happy Sambos,” not too bright and happy if they have food, so suited best to be slaves; then, as “Zip Coons,” who were blathering idiots trying to talk like educated men, an image devised to discredit those like Frederick Douglass arguing eloquently for emancipation; and later, after emancipation, as violent rapists, an image created to try to argue for the need to return to slavery. Africans were depicted as lacking intelligence, and as savages, during and after slavery, and it is unfortunate that there are some today who still equate African Americans as unintelligent, physically able savages.

I experienced this view of me from a college professor at Saginaw Valley State College. My fraternity brother ran track for the university and had been given a track sweater with the school logo on it. I went to track practice one day in the spring of 1981, and the coach asked me to run track for the university; I asked him if I would receive a scholarship, and he stated, “Why do you need money? You’re attending school on financial aid.” I told him then that I would not run track. In the fall of 1981, I was at the gym and happened to be wearing my fraternity brother’s sweater with the track logo on it. The track coach saw me with the sweater and stated, “Give me that sweater, you savage.” I was stunned and felt humiliated. However, this did not stop my desire to continue my pursuit of my academic goals.

African American males, even since the ‘60s, have continued to deal with damaging stereotypes of sports, violence and savagery that work against their success. As Alexander (2010) has documented, these stereotypes have been used and intensified through policies surrounding the War on Drugs of the 1980s. These lingering and reinforced stereotypes are not only affecting African American males academically, but
are also impacting them in other areas, including employment and the criminal justice systems. Even for professional African American males, our image is suspect.

In 2013 while at work at Toledo Municipal Court, I put a hat on getting ready to leave for the day. One of my co-workers, a White female, while in the presence of several other White females made the comment, “You look like a defendant.” When I confronted about her comment, she stated she was “only playing.”

These types of attitudes will continue to play a role in the marginalization of African American males until we as a society decide to do something about it. While attitudes of the dominant culture are certainly not the only problem African American males must overcome in order to succeed, they certainly contribute to beliefs of negative images of African American males, which in turn affects how African American males are perceived by society at large.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this research study is to investigate how a group of African American males whose success is regularly ignored experienced educational success in high school and life success after graduating from high school. A secondary purpose of this research is to investigate how these African American males graduated from high school when faced with the same social and systemic conditions faced by their counterparts, many of whom do not graduate from high school.

This research focuses on five African American males who have been placed on probation for minor misdemeanor charges and who have graduated from high school. The purpose of focusing on this population is that many African American males do graduate from high school, and still are involved in the criminal justice system. As will be seen in
chapter 2, this population is largely absent from the literature, but the literature is relevant to it: Much has been written about students dropping out because they see playing by rules, i.e., graduating, often does not lead to success. Similarly, considerable has been written about African American males in college, as well as African American male athletes. However, a significant number of African American males graduate from high school, do not attend college or make it as professional athletes, and are not written about. And statistically, as will be discussed in chapter 2, many of these young men are in the court system, not in jail but on probation. Learning about the educational success in high school and life successes after high school of young African American men who are on probation fills a gap. The study will look at: (a) how African American males were able to navigate through the educational environment, (b) what motivational factors influenced them to complete high school, (c) what expectations they had after graduating from high school, (d) how they describe academic success, and (e) how they perceive graduating from high school as leading to success, or not.

In examining the skills, techniques, and other factors that African American males utilize to graduate from high school, this research will help educators, healthcare providers, parents, and communities. The benefits of increasing the graduation rates of African American males include but are not limited to: decreasing African American males’ involvement in the criminal justice system, elevating their status in the community as role models, and providing support to their children, both emotionally and financially. Teachers, therefore, can utilize this research to establish new standards in order to promote the academic success of young African American men.
Research Questions

The research will investigate the relationship between personal strategies, techniques, and fortitude and resilience African American males used to graduate from high school. The research will identify the influential factors that African American males utilize to graduate from high school. The following research questions will be addressed:

1. What factors, skills, techniques, knowledge, and support systems facilitated African American males’ completing high school?
2. How have they negotiated life and experienced success after completing high school while being involved in the criminal justice system?

Limitations

Any research study contains limitations which will have effects on the data collected as well as the questions answered. This study will focus on the participants’ lived experience using an in-depth interview strategy of one interview session, but will not involve other data collection. It is thus limited to the individual’s personal understanding and account of his experiences on a given day. The research is limited, intentionally, in how it defines success, and consequently, limited to participants on probation, as they represent a population whose success is ignored. The researcher is limiting the research to African American males between the ages of 18-35 because of the characteristics of this age range, at this time, which will be substantiated in detail in chapter 2. Another limitation is that subjects selected will be males, limiting the subjects to a single sex, and therefore does not give a comparison to female subjects. The research was designed for a particular group of people on probation and should not be considered to be the experience of all academically successful African American male high school
students. The results of this study may be skewed by any number of factors, including geographic location, and the participants’ reaction to the researcher.

**Definition of Terms**

**African American:** “Relating to Americans of African ancestry” (*The American heritage college dictionary*, p.23). “African American” is used throughout the dissertation to emphasize ethnic identity, and is paired with “European American,”; “Black,” which is a racial identity term and is paired with “White” is used in direct quotations or when emphasizing political identity as a racialized and oppressed group.

**Aspirations:** “Desired outcomes absent of limitations constraints or resources” (Harper, 2010, p. 813).

**At Risk:** “Exposure to the chance of injury or loss” (*The American Heritage College Dictionary*).

**Black:** The term “Black” is used instead of “African American” in the case of direct quotation or in the case when the point is discrimination or stereotype based on racial classification.

**Cultural Capital:** “Involves ways of dressing, acting, thinking, or of representing oneself. Thus, style, manners, courtesy, language practices, moving, and socializing are all forms of cultural capital” (Kinacheloe, 1993, p. 46).

**Culture:** “The totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, and all other products of human work and thoughts” (*The American Heritage College Dictionary*, p. 337).

**Disadvantaged:** “Deprived of some necessities or advantages of life including” (*The American Heritage College Dictionary*, p. 394).
**Education**: “To develop a wide range of human capacities that equip one to fill a variety of roles in one’s culture: as a worker, a citizen, a parent, a person who uses leisure in productive ways and it’s not limited to schools” (Tozer et al., 1993, p.8).

**Endangered species**: A species at risk of extinction because of human activity, changes in climate, changes in predator-prey ratios, etc. *(The American Heritage College Dictionary, p. 453)*.


**Marginalized**: “To relegate or confine to a lower or outer limit or edge, as in society” *(The American Heritage College Dictionary, p.829)*.

**Oppositional Identities**: “Black students equate academic success with ‘acting White’ leading Black students to view schooling as a form of forced assimilation to white cultural values”(Harper, 2012, pp.105-106).

**Organizational habitus**: “Refers to a set of dispositions, perceptions, and appreciations transmitted to individuals through a common organizational culture” (Akom, 2003, p. 306).

**Probation Officer**: “Employee of the court system who supervise individuals placed on probation by the courts and help identify social issues to help offender readjust to society” *(The American Heritage College Dictionary, p.1090)*.

**Perplexity**: “The state of being puzzled. The state of being intricate or complicated” *(The American Heritage College Dictionary, p.1019)*.

**Phenomenon**: “An occurrence, a circumstance, or a fact that is perceptible by the senses” *(The American Heritage College Dictionary, p.1025)*.

Schooling: “The totality of experiences that occur within the institutions called school, not all of which are educational” (Tozer et al., 1993, p. 7).

Socioeconomic Status: “An individual’s or group position within a hierarchical social structure. Socioeconomic status depends on a combination of variables, including occupation, education, income, wealth, and place of residence (*The American Heritage College Dictionary*, p. 1292).

Stereotype Threat: “The performance-interfering effects on non-stigmatized groups. These effects are contextual, the situationally aroused predicament of having a negative stereotype about one’s group be relevant to an important performance of behavior” (Steel, 2003, p. 316).

Structural Racialization: “A system of social structures that produces and reproduces cumulative, durable, race-based inequalities” (Grassroots Policy Project, n.d., p. 4).


Summary

The primary purpose of this research study is to investigate how a group of young, African American males on probation, whose success is regularly ignored, experienced educational success in high school and life success after graduating from high school. A secondary purpose of this research is to investigate how these African American males graduated from high school when faced with the same social and systemic conditions often faced by their counterparts, who do not graduate from high
The correlation between economic stability and academic achievement is clear. Public schools systems in America are increasingly poor, and increasingly predominantly inhabited by children of color including African American and Hispanic. A majority-poor student population has been the norm for decades in major urban areas. Many public schools are plagued by declining enrollments, high dropout rates, strapped budgets and low academic standards. These conditions besetting public schools have placed many students of color and students from lower social economic backgrounds at considerable disadvantage academically. However, African American males have additional pressures that impact their academic achievements.

In chapter 2, literature relevant to the study is reviewed. Chapter 3 describes the methodology of life history. Chapter 4 includes the results of the research, i.e., an overview of the five participants’ life histories as well as thematic analysis of them. Chapter 5 presents a summary of the findings, interpretation and discussion of the significance, and recommendations.
Chapter Two

Review of Related Literature

The primary purpose of this research study is to investigate how a group of African American males whose success is regularly ignored experienced educational success in high school and life success after graduating from high school. A secondary purpose of this research is to investigate how these African American males graduated from high school when faced with similar social and systemic conditions often faced by their counterparts, who do not graduate from high school. This chapter begins with a brief discussion of the philosophy of human rights, which constitutes the foundation of the study. It then provides a review of literature in social foundations of education that frames and contextualizes the study, as well as a discussion of how the racial classification system that is basic to the problem investigated has been developed, perpetuated, and challenged. A review of the extant research literature related to how African American males view academic success and the strategies they have incorporated to graduate from high school follows. The chapter concludes with a section on Critical Race Theory (CRT), which frames the assumptions and purposes of the study, and establishes the reasons for using the research methodology that will be developed in chapter 3.

Human Rights Philosophy

Although this is not primarily a philosophical dissertation, a human rights framework is used in this study. The study is based on the assumption that, as justified
through examination of human rights philosophers, African American males should have as a basic human right access to schooling that allows them to develop fully, to create themselves.

It is unmistakably clear that one of the most important rights outside of the right to life and the right to the materials needed to sustain life is the right to a formal education as provided by schools that socializes the individual and prepares her or him to contribute to society. Schooling simply refers to “the totality of experiences that occur within the institutions called school, not all of which are educational” (Tozer and Senese, 2013, p. 7). Education, in contrast, “is a process or set of experiences that allows humans to ‘create’ themselves” (Tozer and Senese, 2013, p. 8): education develops a wide range of human capacities that equip one to fill a variety of roles in one’s culture: as a worker, a citizen, a parent, a person who uses leisure in productive ways. Schooling should provide education in this sense, and schooling is the foundation for individuals to understand their rights as a member of the human race. Education is knowledge, and knowledge is power; those with knowledge understand what education can achieve. There are many rights: education is one right, and only through a quality education do individuals or groups learn of these rights.

Theorizing rights is a complex, unresolved question. I argue that placing a hierarchy on who is better deserving and who is not (by which I mean how humans morally should use their power in ways that would allow all humans to be afforded dignity and human rights) as a means to theorize rights draws attention to the basis on which rights are proclaimed, namely a conception that an individual should be encouraged to go beyond him or herself and his or her own political communities for the
overall betterment of human kind. I argue that humans are responsible for the subversion of rights, and that we have forgotten how humans originally came by rights. To begin with, an understanding of theories of rights is necessary.

The concept of human rights depends on no other source than man’s inherent nature. In his classic “The rights of man,” Thomas Paine (2001) presented an impressive argument on the origins of rights: “The illuminating and divine principle of the equal rights of man (for it has its origin from the maker of man) relates, not only to the living individuals, but to generations of men succeeding each other” (as cited in Hayden, 2001, p. 97). According to Paine, humans, by divine creation, are born equal, and with equal natural rights. These natural rights include the right to existence, and in order to exist, one has rights to subsistence that are inherent from natural rights. Snauwaert (2011) stated that it is important to note the concept of a human being:

Dignity, intrinsic value, and the structure of a good human life are freestanding moral claims; they are independent of any particular metaphysical doctrine. Humanity is a normative conception in the sense that the acknowledgement of another person as human generates a sense of affiliation and responsibility and in turn the denial of the humanness of other persons undermines any moral obligation to them. (p.9)

Right to an Education

One of the most important rights, outside of the right to life and the right to the materials needed to sustain life, is the right to an education. Nussbaum (1990) discussed Aristotle’s views on political institutions and life: “[P]olitical planning is to make available to each and every citizen the material, institutional, and educational
circumstances in which good human functioning may be chosen” (p.203). I proclaim that a life that lacks any of these essentials, as spoken of by Aristotle, is a life that has been morally crippled. Rights, as entitlements, are justified demands to the enjoyment of basic social goods for a life of human dignity. Jover (2001) asked the question, “What justifies proclaiming education as a right?” (p. 216). I argue following Nussbaum that through education, individuals are able to obtain knowledge to develop their individual life plan. Moreover, Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) stated:

> Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit. (Art. 26.1, p.215)

To my mind, the right to an education is not only based on legality, but is a moral principle. Jover (2001) expanded on this moral and ethical perspective, insisting that “the ethical point of view is based on what education means as a human right” (p.216).

When talking about what education means as a human right, the most primary notion can be derived from Nussbaum’s (2001) capabilities approach, with which she argues that humans have a right to certain resources to pursue one’s life plan, and education is a resource that is invaluable in reaching one’s fullest potential.

Social justice must be in harmony within this discussion. How one defines social justice is based on a variety of factors, like political orientation, religious background, and political and social philosophy. Where most injustices in history have been eradicated, it has been through social justice for the good of the order. According to the
principles of social justice, students nowhere should have to be without raw materials: emotional support, intellectual challenges and positive images to reach their life plan.

Surely one might ask why individuals should be entitled to a right to an education. Nussbaum (2001) asked what an individual may expect: “A right to a certain level of achieved well-being? A right to certain resources with which one may pursue one’s life plan? A right to certain opportunities and capacities with which one may, in turn, make choices regarding one’s life plan?” (p.214). Nussbaum further asked “whether political distribution should be understood, primarily, as equality of well being, or equality of resources or equality of opportunity, or equality of capabilities” (p. 214).

The capabilities approach would suggest a response to these questions that as humans we are entitled naturally, no matter where we find ourselves situated in terms of economics, ethnicity, or race, to those rights. Furthermore, the standard of a good human life should not be determined by standards of those who are in a position to provide materials to the less fortunate. Hayden (2001) discussed Nussbaum’s capabilities approach as an acceptable stance regarding individuals and their abilities to shape their life directions:

People’s satisfactions are not very reliable indicators of their quality of life. Wealthy and privileged people get used to a high level of luxury, and feel pain when they do not have delicacies that one think they do not need. On the other hand, deprived people adjust their sights to lower levels to aspire to, and experience satisfaction with a reduced living standard. (p.219)

Thus, for example, if one is not educated well, but does not know that, one adjusts expectations to a lower standard and accepts inferior educational opportunities. Through
education, people obtain knowledge that inspires them to a higher standard of living. Moreover, in Nussbaum’s position as to why the capabilities theory it is justified is that without raw materials, emotional support, intellectual challenges and positive images, the less fortunate will never be able to understand cognitively why they aspire to lower levels to experience satisfaction. The wealthy and privileged understand the capability theory. I concur with Nussbaum’s (1992) argument that “without essentialism of a kind, we are deprived of two moral sentiments that are absolutely necessary if we are to live together decently in the world: compassion and respect” (p.205). Knowing through compassion providing the less fortunate the necessary materials to achieve a higher level of satisfaction is respecting them as humans: to not provide the less fortunate the necessary materials does not provide them ability to critically think for themselves and thereby disrespecting them. When citizens are able to think critically for themselves they are able to draft grievances to redress their concerns. The drafting of grievances will mean that the less fortunate consider that they have rights to materials to achieve their full potential. In making both the issue of rights clear and the relationship between capabilities and rights clear, Nussbaum (2001) pointed out three principles of capability that figure in her analysis:

First, there is what I call basic capabilities: the innate equipment of individuals that is the necessary basic for developing the more advanced capability. Most humans from birth have basic capability for practical reason and imagination. They cannot exercise such functions without a lot more development and education. Second, there are internal capabilities: that is, states of the individuals themselves that are, so far as the individual is concerned, sufficient conditions for
the exercise of the requisite functions. Finally, there are combined capabilities, which I define as internal capabilities combined with suitable external conditions for the exercise of the function. (p.227)

Nussbaum’s three principles of capabilities provides the foundation for my main argument concerning human rights violations of African American male students. Nussbaum’s principles provide the basis to argue that African American male students have basic capabilities for developing a more advanced capability. There must be internal capability which requires sufficient conditions (emotional support, intellectual challenges and positive images) for African American male students to exercise those requisite functions. The final condition that is necessary for African American male students to achieve their fullest potential is the combined capabilities principle, the lacking of public policy preparing the environment, which is education and care to African American male students.

Nussbaum’s capabilities approach to human dignity is that all capable humans be afforded the opportunity to fulfill their life desires and that all governments be obligated to ensure that all of their citizens have a quality education that is needed for the fulfillment of these goals. In opposing this institutional understanding, many would argue that governments should not be responsible for ensuring citizens’ access to a quality education and that it is citizens’ responsibilities to create their own opportunities for advancement by using the educational opportunities that are afforded them.

The principles of the capabilities approach to human rights are compelling, as they argue for the distribution of raw materials not based on advantages from birth, but
on giving all individuals necessary tools to achieve superior excellence. I wholeheartedly agree with Nussbaum (2001), who in making her principles more concrete, stated:

Analyzing economic and material rights in terms of capabilities would thus enable us to understand, as we might not otherwise, a rationale we might have for spending unequal amounts of money on the disadvantaged, or creating special programs to assist their transition to full capabilities. (p.231)

**Human Rights to an Education as a Necessary Condition**

Scholarship supports that a human right to an education is justified and necessary on the basis that education is the foundation for building necessary social opportunity for the actualization of the individual capability. Good education develops critical thinking skills that help people make decisions in their lives that make them good citizens and helps them contribute to the overall betterment of society. Education provides us with knowledge about the world. Education paves the way for character-building, leads to enlightenment, and enriches people’s understanding of themselves. Thus, according to Jackson and Moore (2006), “The quality of life tends to be highly correlated with one’s educational attainment. Moreover, many people see education as the potion for achieving social mobility in industrialized societies” (p. 202). Orr (1991) similarly stated:

The goal of education is not mastery of subject matter, but of one’s person.

Subject matter is simply the tool. Much as one would use a hammer and chisel to carve a block of marble, one uses ideas and knowledge to forge one’s own personhood. (p.5)

A direct effect of education is gaining knowledge. Education gives us knowledge of the world around. Education develops in us a perspective of looking at life. Education helps
us form opinions and develop a point of view. Information we encounter cannot be converted into knowledge without the catalyst called education. Education helps create a clear picture of things around, and erases all confusion. Education kindles the flame of curiosity and helps awaken the abilities to question and reason.

Substantial work suggests that concerns for human rights of African American males should be a major priority for the leadership in the United States to consider. The argument must present the systemic problems facing African American males in education, high dropout rates, suspensions, expulsions, and lower teachers’ expectations for academic success are a few problems which impact their human rights. The same type of organizing including social justice and grass roots efforts have to be considered during this time as was in history, and led to the Civil Rights Act being passed, slavery’s abolition, and passing of several laws to help people advance in the United States. Burris-Kitchen and Burris (2011) discussed human rights in education during slavery “a number of leaders began to discuss education and freedom being a right of man (White or Black). So oppressive and violent was the nature of slavery that fair-minded men across the country not only began to see slavery, but also the denial of education and freedom, as a denial of human rights.”(p.4). When African American males do not obtain academic success they face many social problems that not only impact their lives, but society as well. Alexander (2011) expanded on the direct impact facing African American males leading to human rights violations: “Human Rights Watch reported in 2000 that, in seven states, African Americans constitute 80 to 90 percent of all drug offenders sent to prison” (p.98). The high rate of incarcerations of African American males is a result of the school to prison pipeline, which is greatly influenced by African American males’
expulsion, suspension and dropout rates in school. I argue that this is a human rights violation and there must be a strategy shift to address these issues facing African American males as a human rights violation. Alexander (2010) elegantly supported the need for a move to human rights violation as oppose to a civil rights violations when she stated:

We must lay down our racial bribes, join hands with people of all colors who are not content to wait for change to trickle down, and say to those would stand in our way: Accept all of us or none. That is the basic message that Martin Luther the King Jr. aimed to deliver through the Poor People’s Movement back in 1968. He argued that the time had come for racial justice advocates to shift from a civil rights to human rights paradigm, and that the real work of movement had only just begun. A human rights approach, he believed, would offer far greater hope for those of us determined to create a thriving, multiracial, multiethnic democracy free from racial hierarchy than the civil rights model had provide to date. It would offer a positive vision of what we can strive for, a society in which all humans beings of all races are treated with dignity, and have the right to afford, shelter, health care, education and security. (pp. 258-259)

The urgency facing African American males today calls for a different strategy then the strategies used during the civil rights movement. What Alexander is making clear is that polices today appear to be race neutral; however, the impact of these polices have created conditions for a group of individuals, African American males, that have placed them in critical conditions and the only way to address these problems is from an human rights perspective.
The philosophy of human rights provides an essential, normative basis for the purpose and potential significance of this study. Framing the issue of African American males’ experiences of effects on their ability to pursue school and life success with a human rights framework should greatly bring these concerns to the conscious of America.

**Research on African American Males’ Lack of Success**

Given the concern of this study to advance understanding of African American males’ experience with success and lack of success in school and beyond, it is useful to look at the considerable research has been conducted over the past several decades concerning African American males’ success and failure in school. This research is both useful, as it has contributed understanding and strategies for making schools more effective for African American males, and harmful, in that it has reflected, supported, and thus re-inscribed a broader cultural biases and beliefs that African American males are problems and are likely not to succeed.

At the start of the 1980s, sociologists started to see an increase of African American males dropping out of high school, thus giving birth to terms describing African American males as “at risk,” “in crisis,” “disadvantaged” and an “endangered species.” During this same time period, sociologists also witnessed African American males succeeding in every type of school in the country. In spite of challenging familial, environmental, and school situations, many African American males have been high achievers in schools, but many have not.

Weis, Kupper, Ciupak, Stich, Jenkins and Lalonde (2008) have insisted, “The primary question in the sociology of education revolves around the production of
inequality, the field recognizes that schooling is a valued commodity and that it is
distributed unevenly” (p.15). Sociological studies about the unequal distribution of access
to education and resources in education give strong, interpretive and critical insight into
the question of success and lack of success of African American males. Interestingly,
research has shown the theory of unequal education has come full circle since Brown vs.
Board of Education: as Weis et al. (2008) stated, “Such research usefully informs our
understanding of the ways in which social inequalities are both reinforced and produced
through schools” (p.16).

Through documentation, analysis, and interpretation of the education of African
American males in our public schools, sociologists have come to understand how
education has come to be a state of perplexity for African American males. Phenomena
investigated by sociologists have included cultural differences, inequitable funding,
stigmatization, oppositional identity, and the negative effects of educational scholarship
itself.

Cultural Difference

According to Tozer and Butts (1993), the landmark publication in 1934 of The
Social Foundations of Education by George S. Counts referred to “the cultural
phenomena, institutions, processes, practices, beliefs, values, and ways of knowing that
underlie any society’s educational ideas and practices” (p. 4) as of central interest to
social foundations. Counts’s sociological approach emphasized different cultural
experiences, perceptions, and values: Tozer and Butts (1993) insisted that “those
phenomena are both material and ideational, including institutions of family, governance,
and the economy, as well as beliefs and values that explain and justify those social
institutions and ways of life” (p. 4). Thus it has long been recognized that understanding how students and families experience the culture of the school, and what cultural materials and ideas the school promotes, are deeply related to students’ experiences and thus success. African American males experience cultural phenomena differently from the dominant culture and, importantly, African American males have lacked the cultural capital that is valued in classrooms.

Kincheloe (1993) talked about cultural capital and how the dominant culture values its own notion of cultural capital:

Cultural capital involves ways of dressing, acting, thinking, or of representing oneself. Thus, style, manners, courtesy, language practices, moving, and socializing are all forms of cultural capital. Students from the dominant culture background manifest different cultural capital than students from nonwhite or poor homes. Schools will privilege those students who exhibit the dominant cultural capital while punishing those students who possess very different forms of cultural capital. (p.46)

The idea that the dominant culture notion of cultural capital rewards students who possess those skills and punishes those who lack those skills further gives insight into understanding of the school success and lack of school success of African American males. Kincheloe (1993) cautioned us “that such traits are culturally determined and are inseparable from the socioeconomic background of the individual who exhibit them” (p. 46). From the sociological aspect of cultural phenomena that underlies society’s educational ideas and practices, sociologists such as Kincheloe have suggested that the low socioeconomic status (SES) and perceived lack of cultural capital may be
contributing factors in preventing some educators from offering proper treatment of African American males and poor students in general. Sociologists have long known that social class (SES) impacts culture and young African American males have adopted a totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns and, oral and non-verbal expressions that are in direct contrast to the dominant culture.

Far beyond lacking cultural capital, African American males have been ascribed to have negative cultural capital in the dominant culture, and this supposedly negative culture has been overly popularized in the public imagination, including the imaginations of teachers. According to Noguera (2008), “Although they comprise a relative small portion of the American population (less than 6 percent), African American males occupy a large space within the American psyche and imagination” (p. xi). The occupation that African American males have in the psyche and imagination of Americans is of fear and suspicions. Most often, African American males have been regarded as having uncontrolled and unrefined masculinity and their very presence, particularly when they are encountered in groups, invokes fear. This fear and suspicion has over shadowed the positive news that most African American males value academic achievement and that most are fathers, workers and contributors to their communities.

African American male culture, therefore, is not valued. The devaluing of African American male culture leads to the devaluing of the African American individual—the “organism” himself. This is in accord with the foundational work of the Kilpatrick Group, back in the 1930s at Teachers College, which suggested that devaluing the culture and devaluing the individual result in a lack of learning success, and this oversight leads to oppressive devaluation leaving African American males largely excluded from the
discourse of academic success and placed them in the discourse of failure. The images created of Black men in our society, according to Harper and Davis (2012), “have often confined Black men to environments shaped by drugs, crime, athletics, and academic failure. Society has contributed to this negative portrait by the disproportionate amounts of research in education emphasizing remediation and disadvantage” (p.103). If the Kilpatrick Group’s hypothesis was correct (and continuing scholarship such as Harper and Davis’s suggests it was), then as Black men, the learning organism is marginalized. By his being placed in this negative and marginalized culture created by both popular culture and educational research, the process of learning has been impacted.

Thus we have some understanding of the effects of negative culture, but we have given less attention to the creation of positive culture. Noguera (2008) further stated:

These facts do not negate the significance of the problems that confront Black males, but they do help to keep the problems in perspective. Understanding how many Black males avoid the pitfalls and hardships that beset others may help us to devise ways to protect and provide support for more them. (p. 21)

Noguera’s research thus sets forth a cultural critique argument that scholarship should address African American males who are academically successful. African American males who are academically successful helps dispel negative perception that they are incapable of pursuing anything other pursuits other than athletics, or entrainment careers. The negative images of African American males as academically inferior developed over decades and it will take decades to reverse long-standing assumptions that have beset African American males in respect to academic achievement. When society wants to change public perception about a health risk, there is an educational campaign to reverse
long-standing views, as was the case in changing how cigarettes are a health risk. This same effort should be taken in changing negative perceptions of African American males as academically inferior.

**School funding**

Unequal school funding has also played a role in the success or lack thereof of African American males, and scholarship helps explain the state of perplexity. One of the great controversial factors regarding student success has been the distribution of resources. Many sociologists have argued that the distribution of resources does not affect academic achievement. The most famous study was the Coleman Report of 1966. Weis et al. (2008) discussed the findings of the Coleman report, noting that the report found:

Differences in achievement across race and socioeconomic status are not easily explained by differences in school-based resources. Individual achievement is, in fact, much more highly correlated with family socioeconomic status than with school characteristics. The general conclusion of the highly influential report is that the quality of school facilities and programs minimally affects academic achievement when compared with the effects of family background. (p.16)

On one hand, The Coleman Report has played a significant negative role in how schools have been funded and are funded today, and has been used to justify limited resources toward public education. As common sense and studies since the Coleman Report (e.g., Harper and Davis, 2012) have suggested, lack of adequate public school funding does disproportionally affect African American males and other students of color. On the other hand, the Coleman Report played a positive role in that it highlighted
other social conditions that impacted success of urban students, including unemployment, housing, healthcare, and other aspects of family well-being.

Jencks (1979) and colleagues affirmed and extended Coleman’s findings in their controversial Inequality volume. According to Weis et al. (2008), they concluded that “inequality in the United States can be reduced only by 1% through balancing the quality of high schools. Additional expenditures on schools, they argue, is unlikely to boost achievement, and any redistribution of school-based resources is not likely to reduce the racially related test score gap” (p.17). Both studies, Coleman (1966) and Jencks (1979), have been used to justify not distributing resources to those most vulnerable to academic failure, even though both studies have been shown to be flawed. Weis et al. (2008) argued that issues regarding validity of employed measures have emerged: The Coleman Report used general intellectual measures (e.g., verbal ability) instead of a test targeted more specifically to what is taught in schools may have led to an underestimation of the importance of school resources (p.16).

Debates about how to improve public education since that report have often focused on whether government should spend more on education. Public discourse constantly debates, What does the evidence show about the relationship between public education spending and students’ academic achievement? One of the great controversial factors regarding student success has continued to be the distribution of resources.

Other studies have also pointed to the importance of the school experience, in some cases related directly to funding. Finn, Surrant and Achilles (2007) “looked at small class size, effects on kindergarten through third grade in a Tennessee public school, the results based solely of class size adjustment without any curricular modifications, show
significant academic benefit in every grade” (p. 20). Their research indicated that there are strategies to improving academic outcome of all students regardless of SES or other social factors that have contributed to low academic achievement of African American males and other students of color—but, as in the Tennessee case, such strategies often involve financial resources, such as investment in more teacher positions to facilitate smaller classes.

**Stigmatization as an effect of schooling**

One of the defining features of urban education is the centrality of concern for social inclusion of all students regardless of social economic status. However, Lee (2005) has argued, “Data reveal that schools exacerbate initial disadvantages rather than lessen them and clearly something goes on inside school itself that inhibits achievement of poor children or children of color” (p.17). Similarly, Oakes (1995) stated, “Black and White children do not experience school similarly” (p.17). In examining ways that racism operates, often too subtly to be conscious but sometimes overtly, sociological research has suggested African Americans remain devalued in American schools.

Steel (1992) argued, “The failure of so many African Americans to thrive in school has become one whose persistence causes problem fatigue resignation to an unwanted condition of life. I suspect that this fatigue deadens us to the deepening crisis in the education of African Americans” (pp.1-2). The crisis of African American male success or lack of school success has enough possible causes to give anyone problems of fatigue. Steel (1992) continued her argument:

At a personal level I suspect that there is another culprit, stigma, and the endemic devaluation many African Americans face in our society and schools. This status
is its own condition of life, different from class, money, culture. It is capable in the words of the late sociologist Erving Goffman, of “breaking the claim” that one’s human attributes have on people. I believe that stigma’s connection to school achievement among African American has been vastly underappreciated. (p. 2)

Sociological research has shown that the stigma connected to school achievement of African American males comes from low expectation by educators, which manifest to African American males that the devaluation and stigma simply of being Black contributes to their lack of achievement.

**Oppositional Identity**

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) identified this stigma as oppositional identity and oppositional cultural frame of reference:

The oppositional identity perceptions and oppositional cultural frame of reference enters into the process of minority schooling through minorities’ interpretation of schooling perception and interpretations of schooling as learning the white American cultural frames of reference which they have come to assume to have adverse effect on their own culture and identity and integrity. (p.182)

Findings from this study indicate that when minority students develop this oppositional assessment of education, it may lead to idiosyncrasies which in turn affect how educators see them as a group and may impact expectations and lead to lower academic achievements. My experience working with African American males over the past twenty years has allowed me to gain insight into their perception of education and the stigma associated with the dominant culture, thereby contributing to lower academic standards.
In my estimation this is the most compelling research, as this insight has led to understanding why African American males have come to devalue academic achievement. Many African American males feel that education does not benefit them as possession education as group has not improved their quality of life.

Identity is an important component of how individuals perceive themselves and that perception is manifested into their daily lives, particularly when it comes to confidence in one’s ability. African American males who have been academically successful have had to dispel many negative attacks on their identities’ over the past four decades, to develop a positive identity. There is much scholarship on racial identity and academic achievements of African American students. Ogbu (1991) provided oppositional cultural identity as one form of identity. Ogbu asserted “that blacks have developed an oppositional identity cultural, where blacks because of their internalization of discrimination developed their own culture” (pp.1-2). Reviewing extant research on African American men, Wright (2011) stated:

For many young African men, academic success can come at a high cost: The failure to develop a positive sense of racial-ethnic identity. On one hand, these students are often rejected and marginalized by peers who may accuse them of “acting White” should they succeed. (p. 612)

The scholarship seeks to interpret that African American males who aspire to academics success, most develop an identity that negate social pressure of associating the pursuit of academic success as negative in their peers’ estimation. Wright (2011) reviewed classic research by Fordham and Ogbu (1986) and others, and offered an assessment of African American males’ rejection of academic achievement as “African American male
adolescents rejecting academic achievement in favor of overtly asserting their racial-ethnic identity. This is also not a successful strategy, and can be viewed by teachers and administrators as ‘oppositional behavior’” (p. 612).

Gayles (2005) countered Fordham and Ogbu’s oppositional behavior theory with research that he conducted with three African American males from Benjamin High School one of the least affluent high school in Bayside, Florida. He suggested:

By separating their achievement from social status within BH and engaging their achievement in a utilitarian manner, their achievement had no apparent negative social consequences. All three of the youths stated that their peers had a difficult time believing that the three young men were achievers. How could academic achievement, something that clearly requires some degree of effort, be rendered so completely invisible? I argue that this occurred through the proactive behavior of choices of the students: By diminishing academic achievement in the abstract as well as their individual achievement, they neutralized the potential threat to their social status. (p. 258)

Understanding is a prerequisite in the social science, since understanding helps us know how scholarships develop a reliable knowledge of experiences, based on society.

Relevant to oppositional identity, Wright (2011), in his study on racial identity and academic achievement of five young African American men in an urban pilot high school, challenged Fordham and Ogbu. According to Wright (2011), Fordham and Fordham and Ogbu’s argument failed to take into account those youth who deemphasize group/culture identification, have never had their racial-ethnic identity come into question as many dominated groups have had to counter. African Americans during the
1960s made a concentrated effort to instill racial pride in African American youth, with such slogans as “say it loud, I’m black and proud.” This was an effort to instill racial and ethnic pride in African Americans. The idea of racial ethnic identity as a motivating influence on academic achievement of African American males is best explained by Wright (2011), who claimed, “As this study shows, a healthy racial-ethnic identity can help explain why some African American males succeed in navigating the cultural worlds of home and school to achieve academically. Therefore, a healthy REI is critical to success in school” (p.633).

Other researchers have called into question Fordham and Ogbu’s (1986) oppositional identity theory. Akom (2003) noted, “In the case of the Nation of Islam (NOI), a religious organization composed of black Americans, I did not find patterns of oppositional behavior in the way its construct has been traditionally documented and defined” (p. 306). It is important to note that Akom considered other variables in his study. These variables may have led to the false notions, that oppositional identity explanation, for racial disparity, in education achievement has led African American students to believe that racial identity has been detrimental to their academic success. Nevertheless, Akom stated:

Instead, I observed an involuntary-minority culture of mobility whereby involuntary-minority students in the NOI resisted schooling and society practices that they viewed as being at odds with their religious tenets and practices, yet drew on the moral, spiritual, and material resources facilitated by their tightly knit community to achieve social mobility and academic success. (p. 306)
In this case, NOI members developed healthy racial identities to achieve academic success.

To understand the complex nature of African American youth identity development, Hudley (2008) offered a different perspective on oppositional identity in a potentially hostile society:

The empirical literature connecting African American adolescents’ identity to academic achievement has been somewhat inconsistent. Some work has found no relationship between academic GPA and ethnic identity for African American youth, while other work found that ethnic identification was positively related to school grades and the inconsistent findings may be a function of unmeasured dimensions of identity. (p. 679)

Hudley’s study incorporated a broader range of identity-relevant variables that potentially influenced both academic motivation and achievement.

**The cumulative impact of negative scholarship**

In addition to cultural differences and inequitable funding, educational scholarship itself seems to have contributed to a lack of school success among African American males by focusing on failures instead of successes. Harper and Davis (2012) noted that the academic “perspectives on Black male hopelessness and underachievement are evidenced by the numerous publications that highlight their educational upbringing in insufficiently resourced and culturally unresponsive K-12 schools and many of the issues contributing to the dropout rates of African American males are quantifiable” (p.104). However, there has been little research on African American males graduating from high school and how they were able to achieve academic success facing the same challenges
that their counterparts faced. Focusing on Black males not graduating from high school takes away from understanding how resilience and fortitude of those graduating from high schools, leading us to believe there is no reversing longstanding outcomes disparities that render African American male students the lease, likely to succeed in high school.

**Research on Success and Research Fostering Success**

Scholarship proves how important it is to show that there are African American males who are successful in academics and life in general. By presenting evidence that African American males do graduate from high school while being beset with social conditions that require significant efforts can dispel negative stereotypes about African American males and change attitudes towards them.

**Cultural Identity**

In challenging oppositional identity theory, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) emphasized African American males’ rejection of academic achievement in favor of overtly asserting their racial-ethnic identity. Hudley (2008) emphasized the construct “cultural mistrust,” which he hypothesized is the reason for African American adolescents’ nonacademic pursuits. “Cultural mistrust” is “the tendency for African Americans to distrust institutional, personal, or social contexts that are controlled by Whites” and this construct “attempts to capture the influence of discrimination on academic motivation” (p.679). Tucker, Dixon, and Griddine (2010) offered cultural discontinuity as another rebuff of oppositional identity theory:

The culture of schools in the U.S. is most often aligned with the Eurocentric middle class culture. As a result, many African American children who attend
schools in the U.S. experiences cultural discontinuity, which greatly inhabits their learning experiences. Finding a nurturing, accepting environment within the school system is important for students in order to achieve and maintain academic success. (p. 4)

The scholarship research on the importance of cultural influences on the academic pursuit of African American males is further stated by Hudley (2008): “[R]esearch on the construct revealed that for African American students with high cultural mistrust, aptitude scores were significantly higher when the test was administered by an African American examiner” (p. 680). The dominant culture knows that the preserving of people’s culture is what drives the survival instinct of a group. Culture is tied to education, as Tyack (1974) stated: “Pluralistic politics of urban education were more cultural than economic; citizens influencing school policies were concerned with imposition of their values on others to affirm their subculture in their schools” (pp. 104-105).

Culture provides the society with norms, values, ideas, attitudes, etc, which all help shape the interaction between individuals within social groups. McGee (2013) discussed African American culture in “a small subset of urban Charter schools who are grounded in Afrocentricity, meaning that these schools promote traditional education undergirding by the history and culture of Africans and African-Americans” (p. 451). He found that using Afrocentric curriculum helped African American males to achieve academic success. This research suggests that African American males have adopted a totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns and, oral and non-verbal expressions that are in direct contrast to the dominant culture. However, Parson and Kritsonis (2006)
hypothesized that the culture developed by African American males is useful in helping them achieve academic success:

[T]heorists must look first inside the culture to discovery what Payne (1985) refers to as “hidden rules” these young men bring to the learning from as a result of poverty. The understanding of these rules and how they impact student learning should instigate more research in this area as it relates specifically to academic achievement of African American males. (p. 2)

In their research Parson and Kritsonis (2006) identified six habits of academic achievement by African American males students from households of poverty who have been successful in completing high school that were culturally specific. The six habits or themes were:

(a) Hidden cultural rules that are utilized at various points by Black males to ensure success, (b) a strong sense of self and the innate desire to achieve, (c) sustained motivation for achievement that is threaded throughout the secondary academic career, (d) a determination to succeed despite the influences of poverty (e) a high degree of aspiration to envision success well beyond high school; and, (f) a strong system of significant relationship that exist in the family, community, and school. (p. 6)

From a sociological vantage point on the importance of schooling, developing curricula that are culturally specific to students of color may increase African American males’ interests in education that include their group and sub group cultural perspectives.
Resilience

Differences in life experiences dictate how individuals respond to and utilize resilience. For individuals who have never had to respond to adversity resilience is not a factor in their worldview. Gayles (2005) stated, “There are many forms of resilience and used in a number of different fields and consequently yields a number of definitions.” (p.250). However, scholarship has shown for many African American males who graduate from high school, resilience has played important domain in their academic achievements. Gayles (2005) offered an excellent definition for resilience: “for the purpose of the research presented here, academic resilience is defined as academic achievement when such achievement is rare for those facing similar circumstances or within a similar context. In this sense, resilience is treated as an outcome” (pp. 250-251). Continuing in the same line Griffin and Allen (2006) argued, “For many African American students, especially those educated in urban or inner-city schools. Academic success is contingent on their ability to demonstrate resilience in the face of racism, poverty, and environments with few resources” (p. 6). Should scholarship inquire about the role resilience has played in the pursuit of academic achievement of African American males? Gayles (2005) offered analysis of the roles resilience used by three African American males attending a non-affluent school located just minutes from downtown Bayside. Benjamin High School (BHS) was an urban school located just minutes from downtown Bayside in a decidedly poor, “minority” area of the city. According to Gayles (2005), these three young men were selected due to their academic success (p.252). One of the themes Gayles identified from his research for academic resilience that his participants used was a response to:
Hegemonic narratives that address race, place, schooling, and the value and purpose of academic achievement. The youths’ academic resilience runs counter to these broader narratives, for non-affluent African American men who attend high school such as BHS are not supposed to graduate with honors, be college-bound, and earn prestigious scholarships. (p. 257)

Resilience in this example becomes manifested as a reaction to society’s expectations of these African American males students social economic status and they prevailed academically despite of those low expectations. Williams and Portman (2014) explained, “Educational resilience is the ability of children/adolescents to succeed in schools despite exposure to personal and environmental adversities” (p.14). Griffin and Allen (2006) “explored college preparation of nine black high school achievers attending a well-resourced, suburban high school and eight academically successfully Black students attending a low-resourced urban high school during 2001-02 and the findings indicate students at both schools encountered barriers (that is, racial climate and a lack of resources)…” (p. 1). Griffin and Allen (2006) identified:

…evidence of resilience. Despite the barriers Black high achievers encountered at Bennett and Twin Oaks High, they were not dissuaded from their college goals. All students in this sample has firmly established intentions to attend college; since no students indicated they were not planning to apply. (p.16)

The resilience of African American youth in academic pursuit is not limited to youth from the lower SES as illustrated in Griffin and Allen study. African American youths from different SES also have developed different forms of resilience in pursuit of academic achievement as they encountered stereotypes about their ability to achieve
academic success. Griffin and Allen (2006) found during their study that African American students from both highly resourced and underserved public institutions alike used “strategies that used peer groups to create environments to where, contrary to stereotypes about African American academics abilities, high achievement and college attendance were social expectations” (p. 21). These varying perceptions, according to Williams and Portman (2014), have been refuted in their research. They argued, “Examples of success often are the result of strong, determined personalities, rather than systematic improvement” (p. 3). Williams and Portman (2014) emphasized the protective risk factors: “protective risk factor implies internal and external resources used to moderate or mediate the effects of a risk or adversity and enhance good adaptation of competence” (p.15). Resilience is due to many factors which in some situations are created from society which may be intentional or unintentional, for examples schools that serve racial minorities students may introduce risk factors by falling to provide a supportive school climate, institutionalizing low academic expectations, or delivering inadequate educational resources. To attest to the importance of studying resilience among African American high school students, McGee (2013) insisted:

Failing to acknowledge Black males’ protective factors often skew the data, resulting in a stereotypical perspective. Black male students’ resilience (i.e., the ability to foster change as a result of effort and self-determination) is largely understudied. The lack of research on resilience African American male youth who employ effective coping strategies in meeting challenges has contributed to the misrepresentation of their experiences and outcomes. (pp. 454-455)
The research on reliance is essential to this study as its primary purpose is to investigate how a group of African American males whose success is regularly ignored and who, their position in the justice system would suggest, have had to demonstrate resiliency. The literature on resiliency also informs the secondary purpose of this research, which is to investigate how these African America males graduated from high school when faced with the same social and systemic conditions faced by their counterparts face, who don’t graduate from high school.

**Family and Community Support for Resilience**

Families and community assumes an important role in how resilience is formulated for African American males, particularly for communities and families who have been beset with difficult environmental, social and other adversities that test the sure survival of these two institutions. Robison and Werblow (2012) examined “the ways in which single- Black mothers influences the educational success of their sons by focusing on the mothers academically successful 11th grade Black males” (p. 52). Knowledge is constructed in terms of accepted paradigms of explanation and we gain knowledge by inquiry, as Robison and Werblow asked, “What can we learn about success from those who do succeed in spite of statistical prediction? Can those who thrive in education, in spite of low performance of their peers, teach about how to help more black males succeed?” (p. 53). Again, this literature contributes directly to both the primary purpose of this research study and its secondary purpose.

Differences in communities experience have drastically impacted students educational achievements as noted by Stewart (2007): “[A]ccording to ecological theory, 

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an individual’s environment consist of several co-occurring or nested levels that interact to influences human development” (p.18). Stewart continued:

According to the ecological model of human development, academic achievement among students is influenced not only by social processes in their immediate environments, but also by aspect of their school environments. In the ecological model, the school is conceptualized as a context that directly influences student’s behavior by contributing to the development of competencies that increases the likelihood of academic success. (pp. 18-19)

The inner experience, which is formulated through the interaction between family and communities, is more likely to present African American males with the best opportunities to obtain academic success as Stewart (2007) stated: “[P]eer group context is an important factor in adolescent socialization, motivation, and academic achievement. Research has shown that peer groups wield a great deal of influence over the outlook students adopt towards achievement” (pp.119-120). Stewart continued, “[T]hus, according to the literature, having relationship with positive peers who support academic achievement should positively influence student achievement” (p. 20).

Scholarship has shown that parental involvement is key to academic achievement of all children. However; many African American youths are growing up in homes where they are headed by single mothers. thus leaving single mothers as the main motivators for their children academic achievements. Robinson and Werblow (2012) conducted a study on single mothers of African American males high school students enrolled in failing schools, who despite this were high academic achievers. Single African American mothers have consistently been the cornerstone of the African American community,
particularly when raising their children; rather the situation is due to voluntary absence of the father (fathers themselves who were raised without fathers to help them develop a sense of fatherhood) or involuntary (incarceration or early death due to social conditions that many African American men succumb to in urban areas). African American mothers have admirably taken on the roles of both mother and father in many households.

Robinson and Werblow’s (2012) research identified the common characteristic of these mothers of academically successful African American males in low performing school as follows:

(a) knowledgeable resource, using their own skills and resources to teach their sons how to be successful, (b) tactful motivator, motivating their sons by nurturing their passions and strengths, (c) support of whole child, through constant monitoring (direct/indirect), (d) provide financial, psychological, and emotional support to their sons. (p. 59)

Through these characteristic single Black mothers are able to develop strategies to help their sons be academically successful. Robinson and Werblow identified these strategies as (a) talk to him regularly(knowing what issues and problems their sons are facing by having meaningful, daily interaction with their sons), (b) leverage positive roles models in the community (surround their sons with positive live role models, teacher, ministers, and coaches), and (c) address the root of the problem facing their son (get to the root of the problem by identifying individual people, peers, teachers or counselor). This research study not only highlighted the magnitude of parental involvement in their children education, it also provided a framework to help other single African American mothers
achieve academic success with their sons who are facing the same socially challenging conditions.

**Curricula to foster success**

One effect of focusing on success has been the development of curricula informed by sociological studies and designed to foster success. From a sociological vantage point on the importance of schooling, developing curricula that are culturally specific to students of color may increase African American males’ interests in education. “Culturally specific” curricula would include, according to Banks (1991), attention to race, class, gender, ethnicity and exceptionality (p. 4). For example, Banks (1991) noted, “The knowledge construction dimension of culturally specific curriculums is an essential one. Culturally specific curriculum is reconceptualized to help students understand how knowledge is constructed and how it reflects human interests, ideology, and the experiences of the people who create it” (p. 37). Moreover, curricula for the culturally relevant needs of this population would target what is specifically taught in school and may lead to greater academic success for students of color and particularly African American males. “Culturally relevant needs” are those needs that, according to Lynn (2001):

Allow teachers to believe in African American students and have high expectations for them. In order to be effective, one’s curriculum should be drawn directly from “the child’s own experience.” Culturally relevant teaching that address the needs of students of color also have to be current. Any pedagogy, if it is to be relevant to minority youth in today’s urban schools, has to consider fully the conditions in which learning takes place. (p. 2507)
A National Emergency

Sociological research suggests that African American male success must become a national concern and be treated as an emergency as the dropout rates of African American males in 2012 compared to their counterparts in the 1970s and ‘80s have presented a societal problem about which everyone should be concerned. As Rury and Hill (2012) have stated, “By the end of the 1970s, Black graduation rates were closer to those of Whites than at any time in American history” (p.16). However, those graduation rates have not been maintained. McGee (2013) provided data that show the persistent decline in African American males graduation rates: As noted by the Schott Foundation for Public Education (2012), “[O]nly 41% of African American males graduate from high school in the U.S. and in some urban cities only 30% of African American males graduate from high school” (p. 449). Comparing this rate to the graduation rates of White, non-Latino male students who, according to the Schott Foundation for Public Education (2012) have a 78% graduation rate, shows a huge disparity between the two groups. The failure of African American males to graduate from high school has devastating consequences and the biggest disadvantage, according to McGee (2013), is this failure leaving more than half of African American males between the ages of 16 and 19 unemployed (p. 448).

Schooling opens doors and opportunities and allows those with schooling to make life decisions about those without. Nowhere is this more evident than in research on the school-to-prison pipeline. Haney and colleagues (2005) recently turned their attention to what they call “the pipeline, analyzing data on grade enrollment and graduation over the last several decades both nationally (1968-2000) and for 50 states (1984-2000), a
sustained effort to assess the progress of public school students moving from kindergarten through secondary graduation focusing on simply staying in school” (p. 18). The study not only amplified the simplicity of not graduating from high school for African American males and other students of color, but also put focus on issues of simply staying in school. Haney and colleagues suggested that keeping African American males and other students of color in school as long as possible is still a benefit whether they graduate or not. Haney and colleagues are arguing that the benefit of exposure to education over an extended period of time provides African American males and other students of color, the opportunity of being in a learning environment, thereby, not only increasing the possibilities of obtaining some academic success, but the possibilities that the extended exposure may increase their motivation to graduate from high school.

**Critical Race Theory**

Interpretive and critical scholarship as reviewed lays out the need for a new theoretical framework that redirects our scholarly attention to understanding individuals’ interpretations of their experiences in racist institutions, provides critique of those institutions, and then sets forth steps toward action. I argue that Coleman and Jencks are propitious in their hypothesis regarding school funding, and that Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) enable us to analyze school success through their development and application of Critical Race Theory (CRT) to schooling.

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) declared, “Our discussion of social inequity in general, and school inequity in particular is based on three central propositions,” which they stated as:

1. Race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in the United
States.

2. U.S. society is based on property rights.

3. The intersection of race and property creates an analytic tool through which we can understand social (and, consequently, school) inequity. (p. 48)

Thus Ladson-Billings and Tate recommended strongly that mainstream education must use race and property in a CRT theoretical lens in order to assess social inequity (p. 50).

For example, more than sixty years after the decision of Brown vs. the Board of Education, millions of African American youth are still being deprived of a quality education because of funding of education is tied to property values and in predominantly African American communities many homes have low property values. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) in their CRT hypothesis state that property is the basis for social inequity and that there is three correlated factors related to property:

- Race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in the United States. U.S. society is based on property rights, and the intersection of race and property creates an analytic tool through which we can understand social (and, consequently, school) inequity. (p. 48)

Providing education in low-income communities has certainly not been a societal priority. Students in low-income neighborhood schools still lack basic resources necessary for a student to learn. When funding public schools on property taxes, public school students will continue to be subjected to an inferior education. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) continued their argument regarding the use of property tax to fund public schools:
Property relates to education in explicit ways. Recurring discussions about property tax relief indicate that more affluent communities (which have higher property values, hence higher tax assessments) resent paying for a public school system whose clientele is largely non-white and poor. In the simplest equations, those with “better” property are entitled to “better” schools. (pp. 53-54)

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argued “that race remains untheorized,” noting,

[W]e are not suggesting that other scholars have not looked carefully at race as a powerful tool for explaining social inequity, but that the intellectual salience of this theorizing has not been systematically employed in the analysis of educational inequality. Thus, like Omi and Winant, we are attempting to uncover or decipher the social-structural and cultural significance of race in education. (p. 50)

As the literature reviewed about school success and lack thereof indicated, scholars have identified cultural and funding issues. Following Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), this dissertation systematically presents individuals’ interpretations of their experiences, via a life history approach, in order to systematically analyze their interpretations to show the significance of structural and cultural factors of racism.
Chapter Three
Methodology

The ominous statistics about African American males’ underachievement in both academics and overrepresentation in the criminal justice system do not necessarily tell the complex narratives and counter-narratives of academically achieving African American males in the criminal justice system. This study employs a life history approach in order to address the void by focusing on and problematizing their success.

Rationale, Strategy, and Genre

This research uses qualitative research to elucidate the vivid experiences of young African American men regarding success in school and life. A qualitative researcher’s role as a social scientist is to assess others’ interpretations of some social phenomenon and of interpret others’ actions and intentions. Most broadly, this involves the research goal of interpreting the social world from the perspective of those who are actors in that social world. Thus interacting with people in their social contexts and talking with them about their perceptions is a logical method of the qualitative researcher. Observing, asking questions, looking for patterns an analysis and interacting with research participants leads to a descriptive write-up and supports the value of qualitative research.

Qualitative research inquiry mode is an ideal method to study ideas about justice and fairness, and has been widely used (e.g., Hamer, Jenkins, and Moore, 2013). The nature of the inquiry, observation, interacting, and dialoguing with research participants, on the issues of justice and fairness help open the lines for communications and builds
trust and rapport between the researcher and participants. According to Subreenduth and Rhee (2009):

   Educational researchers must be able to ask and articulate how we can struggle against hegemony which already includes us and which can no longer be clearly demarcated into imperial researcher and colonized researched spaces. If educational researchers insist either on scientific objectivism or native/insider authenticity as the opposing but most or only legitimate ways in conducting research, we are limiting our researching moves to the very definitions that already mark, police, and discipline us. (p. 343)

   As researchers, upon finding hypotheses to be true, depending on the nature of the outcome of the research, the researchers have several options on what to do with the data. One approach is to take an activist approach to the project.

   Researchers taking an activist approach not only perform research to prove or disprove their theory, but also accept an obligation morally to address the outcome of the data. As an activist researcher, one is in the position to advocate for change. In the current research, I am taking the approach of activist researcher and will address what to do with the outcomes of the data in chapter 5. When conducting research, from an activist perspective, one has to be confident and secure in their role as an activist. Activist researchers are probably not the most popular researchers due to the nature of their work. After conducting research and proving or disproving a phenomenon, an activist researcher sets in motion to change or empower those who are voiceless and powerless in order for them to change social conditions in their lives. When people want change, many times change comes at the expense of those who hold power and become agitated by the
change seekers. As an activist researcher, identifying injustices and helping people improve their lives gives confidence to this researcher, knowing that it is ethically right to help those who are unable to help themselves. Scheper-Hughes (2006) illustrated how her role as an activist researcher put her in direct conflict with the power structure:

In southwest Alabama as a civil rights worker affiliated with SNCC (the Student-Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) during a period of transition to Black Power, I had to elude at various times both radical militants and Selma’s fine police, once taking refuge in a Catholic priest’s rectory for a few weeks until the local bishop out and identified a more appropriate safe house. But each time in the past my leave-taking had been cushioned by local supporters and, once the tricky period had passed, I would be helped back into the community to occupy one of those many spaces of solidarity that gives life meaning, whether one is a refugee, a political activist, or an anthropologist. (p. 325)

Activist researchers many times expose issues that the status quo does not want to address. Undertaking my research on African American males may have some questioning the value of this research, as African American males are marginalized by society. Thus, any effort to address their concerns may be met with indifference.

The genre of this research is oral history which is closely related to life stories. Fontana and Frey (2011) noted that oral history became popular in the 1970s as a way to give “voices to the voiceless” (p. 709). According to Chaitan (2008), “Oral historians ask people to talk about their overall life experiences or to discuss specific experiences and events in a narrative form, recording this information with either audio or video equipment. The aim of oral history is to gain first-hand knowledge from people who have
lived through different social–historical–political periods and events” (p. 583). In this research, the researcher will ask young African American men about their experiences in school and life after school in order to gain first-hand knowledge about being young and Black in the early 21st century U.S. Oral historians commonly document sides of life that are overlooked, including “urban issues, especially long-term poverty, slum and inner-city life, and the social consequences of this poverty, such as delinquency and homelessness; immigration, focusing on issues of socialization, education, and assimilation” (Chaitan, 2008, p. 583). The current research is in keeping with that tradition of documenting the overlooked from the point of view of the overlooked.

Sometimes used interchangeably with oral history and other times considered a subtype of oral history, “life stories” focus more on what we can learn about the individual than about the historical period, and it is appropriate for this research, as we are focusing on individuals’ experience. Gough (2008) noted that life stories “typically seek to provide accounts and analyses of how people make sense of their lived experience in the construction of both individual and social identity” (p. 484), which is what this research will do.

Setting

The setting for this research is Toledo, Ohio. The immediate setting of the research is the Toledo Municipal Court, which at the time of this research was also the place of employment of the researcher.

As a researcher, the hypothesis or question to be answered sets the foundation for the research project, including site selection. The primary strength in the site chosen for this study was the mixture of different ethnic groups participating in the activity at the
site. The setting also afforded the researcher to have access to participants from different social economics status.

As stated by Glesne (2011), “many researchers are drawn to studying their own institution or agency, to doing backyard research” (p. 41). After working in the criminal justice system over twenty-four years, this is where my interest was first peaked in the educational needs of African American males. Thus, my agency was a natural fit to conduct my research, particularly since there is no research of African American males who are on probation and how they few education as success.

Participants

Glesne (2011) discussed selection of study participants, noting that “since most research situations are too vast to interview everyone or to observe everything associated with the topic, you need a justifiable selection strategy by which to chose people, events, and times” (p. 44). The participants selected to complete the study were African American males who were at the time of the study on probation with Toledo Municipal Court. All participants had graduated from high school within the last three years of this study. The researcher is a probation officer with the court, and so was a familiar person; however, no participants were on his caseload so there was be no ethnical conflict. The sample consisted of five African American males ranging in age 18 to 35. The participants were recommended by their probation officers based on their completing high school and being within the 18 to 35 age group. Once a probation officer identified a potential participant, the officer talked to him about the study and asked if he would be interested in participating. If the potential participant was interested, the officer then
introduced him to the researcher, who then obtained contact information from the participant.

**Consent and confidentiality**

Particularly because of the “backyard” nature of the research, it was important to devise measures to protect the confidentiality of those who chose to participate. The administrators responsible for the site (Toledo Municipal Court) understood that the Court would have no access to the raw data, but would only receive a report of the analysis. The referring intake or probation officer was not informed whether their probationer ultimately decided to participate or not; the interviews took place in a private office with the door closed; pseudonyms were used and any identifying information given in the interview was deleted; no data was shared with the officers, or with anyone else.

The consent form was given to the participant when the participant was referred, and was explained at that time. In order to allow the participant time to consider whether participating was in his best interests, and to consult with others about this, the consent form was not signed until the researcher and participant met for the interview. The signed consent forms were kept in the researcher’s locked file cabinet in his home; the consent form was kept separate from the data collected.

**Researcher Role and Subjectivity**

According to Glesne (2011), the researcher has a role requiring him to be multitalented and capable of distinguishing and setting aside his own personal values, beliefs and philosophical perspectives, keeping these distinct from participants’ values, beliefs, and perspectives when entering into research projects.
Documenting the personal biography of the researcher is one part of subjectivity. As the researcher in this study, I am an African American male who graduated from high school from the public school system. There are many similarities between myself and participants. I attended public school in the same district as all the participants spent some of their school time; however, four decades separate my schooling from the participants’ schooling, and therefore I was aware there would be some difference in generational norms. Aside from the generational norms, however, in the interviews and in analyzing them I found that I had been exposed to some of the same academic challenges as the participants described, including underfunding, transient teachers, and lower academic expectation from teachers, which resulted in their tracking me into non-challenging courses. I also similarly grew up in a community that was below the poverty level. Experiencing these academic challenges in the past and currently working as a probation officer greatly influenced me to conduct this study of African American males’ success and lack of school success. Recognizing the importance of the topic was in and of itself a result of my subjectivity. Some of my most influential experiences are included in chapter 1 and thereby provide transparency concerning my subjectivity. In addition, I have included reference to insights informed by my personal experience throughout the work, to acknowledge explicitly and openly that my life experience and subjectivity do influence my research—which is true of all researchers, whether they acknowledge it or not.

No researcher enters into research without personal subjective lenses (preconceived notions, biases, and personal opinions) that can alter or affect research outcome. Researchers upon on determining their problem statement should reflect on
their subjectivity to see how the research they are entering may be altered or compromised. Human emotions are a natural state and to deny or pretend that a researcher is capable of ignoring subjectivity without reflecting on personal biases will compromise the research project. Glesne (2011) referenced Peshkin as a research who “viewed subjectivity as autobiographical, emotional states that were engaged by different research situations” (p. 152). My research and past educational experiences as an African American male with the topic have influenced my thinking, as it is the main reason for undertaking the research project. Thus, the reader can see how experiences suit me for the research, and also the reader can judge whether I am letting my subjectivity bias the research. Carefully guarding against biasing the participant by my over-participating in the research was one way I kept my own subjectivity from biasing the research. Systematic analysis using both narrative methods and thematic coding, to ensure that I focused on the participants’ meanings rather than my own, was another.

**Ethics**

Conducting research can place research participants in harm’s way if the researchers do not follow guidelines to protect participants. When research is done to secure grants or other monetary awards, history has shown that people will subject research participants to many unethical experiments as notated by Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI): “Highly publicized abuses in research led to congressional hearings in 1974. Congress commissioned the preparation of a set of ethical principles, known as the *Belmont Report*. The federal regulations for protecting research subjects” (p. 1): House (1991), as well as IRB training and other sources, emphasized that one of the main elements of ethical research is non-coercion and non-
manipulation. No participants will be on the caseload of the researcher so none will feel coerced or manipulated, and information disclosed will not affect their treatment by their own probation officer or the court. In studying participants in the criminal justice system, it is particularly important to protect rights, as these participants are in a precarious position and could be manipulated or coerced—or could feel that they were manipulated or coerced. Thus in this research, as detailed in the description of consent, above, I took great care to avoid any situation that could be construed by participants as manipulative or coercive.

Although initially I had planned, and my committee favored, interviewing the participants away from the courts to protect confidentiality, a different ethical obligation outweighed this: by holding the interviews in my office, and protecting confidentiality by closing the door, I ensured that the participants would incur no financial obligations, as they were reporting to their probation officer and the interviews took place before or after their meeting with their respective probation officer. This eliminated any travel costs, parking fees, or other expenses to the participants, and minimized infringement on their time. They were further compensated by a small honorarium for each interview, which served to encourage them to make time to attend, and to honor them in a small way for the experience that they shared.

Another ethical consideration was risk to participants. As the CITI described, sometimes obtaining written consent can be negated because written consent is too risky: Asking subjects to sign consent forms linking them to a study about illegal activities could put them at risk of harm” (p. 1). This did not apply to my work, as I was very clear
in stating that I did not want to hear about illegal activities or the causes of their being in the court system, but only about their school experiences and views of success.

There were minimal risks to participation in this study. The topics of the interviews were the participants’ academic success and achievements, and the factors that contributed to these. Criminal involvement is not part of the study. I designed the study to protect the participants from potential risk both by assuring confidentiality and by minimizing social and psychological stress by focusing only on successes. However, it was possible that the interview would bring up memories that are distressing or reflect on current distressing situations. Thus I ended each interview by telling the participant that if anything from the interview distressed them, they should let me know, and I would give them names and contact information of individuals (e.g., counselors) or agencies (e.g., mental health centers) that could help. This situation did not come up for any of the participants in the study.

Another ethical consideration was the benefit the participants gained from the study. In this case, the only direct benefit was the satisfaction of knowing that their participation in the study would help their counterparts: the 53% African American males who don’t graduate from high school. They were told that the results of the study will be shared with students, teachers, administrators, and the community who may then use it to help other African American males graduate from high school despite overwhelming challenges they faced. They were also apprised of the benefit to society, which would see more African American males graduating from high school, thus, becoming employable, seeing a reduction in the number of African American males’ incarcerated, and potentially a longer life span and being able to provide support to their children,
economically, emotionally, and academically. There were minimal risks in the study, and the benefits of the study were judged to outweigh the minimal risk.

**Data Collection Methods and Data Management**

The methods for data collection included autoethnographic journaling and, primarily, interviews with participants. Fontana and Frey (2011) stated that “oral history interviews are same in method as interviews in any qualitative research; they differ only in intent.” (p. 708).

I used qualitative techniques to determine how these young African American men thought and talked about their school experiences in relationship to being African American, male, and successful in school and the extent to which they have achieved life success. Each participant responded to a common set of question regarding their academic experiences (see Appendix A). Antoni, Marcus, Anthony, Jaquelle, and Emir (the names participants chose to have used in this study) were each interviewed once. The interviews were structured, and guided by an open-ended protocol that was designed to encourage the young men to talk freely. Each related their stories, describing the salient points of their motivations for graduating from high school, including who were the most influential individuals were in their life, what strategies and coping skills they used to navigate through challenging social conditions. Their accounts of their academic experiences provide a rich reservoir of experiences in which to search for commonalities.

The interviews were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed. When I received the professional transcriptions, I printed them and went over them while listening to the audiorecording to make corrections and assure descriptive validity. The transcript data was stored on my computer and back-up flash drive.
Data Analysis

I conducted narrative analysis to look closely at the participants’ experiences as young African American males navigating, challenging, and being challenged, within their urban schools and neighborhoods. I embraced the concept put forth by Creswell (2013) whereby the narrative researcher collects stories from individuals, about individuals’ lived and told experiences. This form of qualitative research is important for its ability to harness alternative views, and to help build an understanding of identifying and decision-making of individuals who are being studied. After reviewing the transcripts for accuracy as described above, I read each transcript twice while listening to the recording, and identified the discrete narratives within it using Labov’s method, which will be described later. I then analyzed the evaluation segments of each narrative into themes and meanings that lay the foundation for codification. Creswell (2013) stated:

There may be a strong collaborative feature of narrative research as the story emerges through the interaction or dialogue of the researcher and the participants. Narrative stories tell of individual’s experiences, and they may shed light on the ideas of individuals and how they see themselves. Narrative stories are gathered through many different forms of data, such as through interviews that may be the primary form of data collection, but also through observation, documentation, pictures, and other sources of qualitative data. (p. 71)

Of primary interest in this study was the participants’ relationship between personal strategies, techniques, and fortitude and resilience they used to graduate from high school. Creswell (2013) reminded us that as social actors, we gather “personal
reflections of events and there causes and effects from individual or several individuals. These narratives may be guided by interpretive frameworks” (p. 73). In this study, the narratives gave voice to a marginalized group in academic achievement. The task of this study, then, was to interpret the influential factors that the participants utilized to graduate from high school, and how participants structured their narratives in order to make sense of their experiences. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) noted, “We chronicle our lives in terms of a series of events, happenings, influences, and decisions. “Narrative, as autobiography, describes the way in which people articulate how the past is related to the present” (p. 68). The analysis sought to identify specific patterns, behaviors and to uncover commonalities with narratives focusing on first individuals and then within the group of narratives as a unit. Thus, in the analysis that follow, narratives have been analyzed through a process of coding for themes using a prior coding and emergent coding, whereby the data were first deconstructed and labeled and then selectively categorized (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Data and coding patterns were then compared. Coding was repeated until there was good inter-rater reliability, with my dissertation advisor checking the narrative analysis and thematic analysis. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) explained that Labov developed an approach to structural analysis that provides a way to understand narratives’ structural properties in relation to their social functions. “Attention to the structure of the narrative might include looking at how the story is organized, how the tale is developed, and where and how the narrative begins and ends“(Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, 58). There are various specific approaches to the organization of narratives. Labov’s is one of the most basic approaches, one that captures some of the
more general characteristics of this style of analysis. My interest is the same as Labov’s: to identify how the participants tell stories. Coffey and Atkinson explained:

As is apparent, the interest here is not solely in the formal analysis per se but also in using the structures to identify how people tell stories the way that they do: how they give the events they recount shape; how they make a point; how they “package” the narrative events and their reactions to them, and how they articulate their narratives with an audience or audiences that hear from them. (p.58).

I based my thematic analysis on the part of the narrative identified in Labov’s model as “evaluation.” Coffey and Atkinson (1996) explained that “Labov’s evaluation domain typically highlights the point of the narrative” (p. 60). The advantage in narrative analysis of the men’s narratives of school success is that participant provides an evaluation of their academic experiences, and gives the audience their understanding of the outcome, as they navigated challenges they faced through elementary and high school. Riessman (1993) stated the core narratives “provide a skeleton plot, a generalizable structure” that can be use” to compare the plots of individuals who share a common life event” (pp. 60-61).

The arrangement of the narratives and analysis as presented in chapter 4 flows from several readings of the verbatim transcriptions. The first perusal presented various experiences, skills, techniques, knowledge, and support systems that facilitated the participants completing high school. As I began to examine the transcripts through Labov’s process of structural analysis elements (evaluation), I choose to arrange these elements into a paragraphs format for review. Once in the format, it was clear that the
individual narratives, as described in chapter three, are either parallel in nature or can be read against or off each other tend to increase each other’s meaning and point to the complexity of storytelling.

As others have noted, I found the process of identifying narrative themes for analysis to be painstaking. Oftentimes the divisions of the parts of the narrative were not clear cut, and as Labov (1973) cautioned, I found that my men’s stories of success did not follow exactly the structure that his boys’ fight stories did. In addition, I had to determine when to leave in my words and when to eliminate them to avoid distraction. So, for instance, if my questions served as the “abstract,” or what the narrative is about, it is included; however, if I was simply encouraging the participant to continue his story, those words are deleted so as not to interrupt the flow of the narrative. For instance, I had to prompt the man to explore their feelings and expand on their thoughts, sometimes simply by repeating or paraphrasing what they had just said and pausing, or sometimes with phrases such as “That’s really great that you had the insight to notice…..” or simply “Okay,” or “Right.” These are deleted. The decision to analyze and interpret segments is an interpretive decision presented in this study by my theoretical interests.

I coded the evaluation section of each narrative to identify the main points that the narrator made about graduating from high school and life after high school, which facilitated comparing among individual participants. Identifying codes as I was refining the narrative analysis, I made a list of codes I defined from the literature as recited in chapter 2 (a priori codes) and also from my participants’ words (emergent codes). I determined themes and organized their ideas into a coding structure. Sections to follow include their words of what contributed to their academic success:(a) Factors that their
completing high school; (b) Factors to which they attributed to their academic success; (c) Teachers and others during their academic experience that contributed to their academic success; (d) Their thoughts about obtaining a high school diploma; (e) Their family, relatives, neighbors, including neighborhood, friends and others in their communities who influenced them academically; and (f) How have they negotiated life and experienced success after completing high school while being involved in the criminal justice system.

Validity

Research is used on many levels to prove or disprove problem statements. Research is also is used to justify economic opportunity related to education. “All forms of capitalism are based on and promulgated economic accumulation for the few at the expense of others in the guise of economic growth” (Beach, 2003). With research those who have power are able to justify how resources are distributed as noted by Beach (2003), “with respect to how strong statistical correlations between educational qualifications and social class, ethnicity, and gender within capitalist societies have been retheorized as naturally occurring individual differences in fetishist research process within education research” (p.859).

Education is the gateway to the improvement of one’s social, political, economic and health status. It is not education itself, as all Americans are afforded the opportunity of at least a high school education, however, as shown by Fine (1991) it is the quality and outcome of a high school education that improves the quality of life. Beach (2003) stated:

In all hitherto known capitalist societies there has been consistent bias in education that has favored economically wealthy groups. My suggestion is that
because of the inequities of capitalism, education research should be concerned with trying to improve equity and democracy both within and through education and that it also requires a validity form that corresponds with this task. Catalytic validity does this. (p. 86)

The most basic question in validity concerns clarity over what is being described and from what point of view. Maxwell (1992) stated that validity is not a particular method, but pertains to data accounts, or conclusions reached by using methods in a particular context for a particular purpose. Maxwell gave five categories of validity that concern qualitative researchers and trustworthiness: (a) descriptive validity, (b) interpretive validity, (c) theoretical validity, (d) generalizability validity, and (e) evaluative validity. Descriptive validity is the most important concern as stated by Maxwell, as it deals with factual accuracy of their account, not making up or distorting things they saw. Interpretive validity is concerned with the meaning of objects, events, and behaviors and what they mean to people engaged in and with them. Theoretical validity, the degree of abstraction of the account in question, form the immediate physical and mental phenomena studied. Generalizability refers to the extent to which one can extend the account of a particular situation or population to other persons, times, or settings than those directly studied. Evaluative validity, involves the application of an evaluative framework to the object of study. If qualitative researchers follow the suggestions of Maxwell and others when conducting research their findings will be credible and trustworthy.

At another level of consideration for validity of research, Beach (2003) discussed two different levels of validity, asserting:
The first is within research situation with respect to the relationship between what are commonly termed as researchers and researched groups. The intention breaking down the researcher-researched distinctions within research privileging the former, to live out fundamental values of democracy and inclusion within research the research process itself. The second is the relation to the democratic change process within broader society, to contribute to democratic process of change by developing research that synthesizes local beliefs and critical social theory as practical knowledge for the democratic transformation of the social institutions and situations that researchers otherwise only observe and theorize and write about. Together the two levels of validity are meant to lead to research where the interests of oppressed or marginalized groups are heard and responded to and where there is a potential to initiate and structurally support necessary processes of democratic change. (p. 86)

Using Beach’s formulation of validity, this research is valid in that it privileges the researched participants’ voices by using narrative analysis, and it can reasonably be expected that the research will have a “catalytic” effect for transformation toward a more democratic society.

**Conclusion**

The central purpose of this methodological design was to examine the characteristics of academically achieving, economically challenged African American males who had graduated from public schools but had encountered misdemeanor infractions and were thus on probation. From the analysis of the data, I brought to the forefront the emotions, attitudes, beliefs, and social and cultural factors that influenced
these young men’s academic success as well as the type of success they were able to achieve after high school graduation. This research study thus was designed to bring to light the lives of academically accomplished young men who are normally invisible and who some might label as unsuccessful because of their minor criminal offenses.
Chapter Four

Results: Narrative and Thematic Analysis

I interviewed ten African American males who graduated from high school and at the time of the research were on probation for minor misdemeanor offenses, asking them to tell me their personal histories of school experiences and how these have affected life successes. From these ten participants, I selected five whose narratives and insights were representative of the whole group and analyzed the histories of only these five: While the other five also tell important stories, which will be included in other versions of this study, for this dissertation, focusing on five contributed to clarity in reporting. This study lends voices to a population whose character has been scrutinized and whose values have been questioned.

This study utilized narrative analysis procedures (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996): as detailed in chapter 3, I used a structured interview protocol process to identify participants’ perceptions and explore their insight and beliefs. I then used standard narratives analysis techniques as Coffey and Atkinson (1996), explained, based on Labov’s method: I identified parts of the narratives, with particular attention to the evaluation within each narrative as this was key to understanding the meaning of the narratives to the participants, i.e., for assuring interpretive validity (Maxwell, 1992). Analysis of the narratives followed the model outlined by Labov, which has been called an “evaluation model” (Cortazzi, 1993). The model has several domains that are used to use to identify a number of units of narrative structures: abstract, orientation,
complication, evaluation, resolution, and code (see Appendix B). Narrative analysis is useful, because it highlights structural units that help think about data in order to facilitate more general and sociological kinds of analysis (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Within this structure, key events or insights that motivated the participants can be identified by the participants themselves. The “so what,” or what the narrative meant to its teller, comes out in his evaluation; as detailed in chapter 3. As readers go through structural elements of the featured narratives, they will see that I was most interested in the “evaluation” segment of the interview, or rather, the words that reveal the attitude of the participants and how they give the events that shaped their desire to graduate from high school. The following arrangement of narratives and analysis flows from several readings of the verbatim transcriptions.

In the first half of this chapter, all of each of the five men’s narratives are represented together in order to provide a snapshot of each man himself. To do this I reorganized the transcripts for each into chronological order: Early years, family, high school, graduation, and current situation, ending with their ideas on success. The parts of the narrative are identified with Labov’s labels, as explained in Table 1. In the second half of this chapter, I do a cross-case comparison of the narratives using thematic analysis of the evaluation portions of all the narratives.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>Abstract</th>
<th>What was this about</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>Who? What? When? Where?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complication</td>
<td>Then what happened= Action</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation</th>
<th>So what?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Result</td>
<td>What finally happened?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coda</td>
<td>Finish narrative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Narrative Analysis’s Using Labov’s Elements

Within each narrative, only the participant’s words are included unless the interviewer’s comment was an integral part of the narrative. So, for instance, if the interviewer’s question serves as the “abstract,” or what the narrative is about, it is included; however, if the interviewer is simply encouraging the participant to continue his story, those words are delegated so as not to interrupt the flow of the narrative. For example, I had to prompt the men to explore their feelings and expand on their thoughts, sometimes simply by repeating or paraphrasing what they had just said and pausing, or sometimes with phrases such as, “That’s really great that you had the insight to notice…..” or simply “Okay,” or “Right.” These are deleted in presentation here.

The participants’ words are verbatim. Grammar is kept as spoken grammar, so will appear non-standard in terms of the standard American English (SAE) that composition papers are normally written in. This is done purposefully to capture their true essence as storytellers: this is oral art transcribed onto paper. No doubt if any of them were writing this, their grammar would be significantly different. This is important to note because oftentimes people judge others on how they speak, and are biased against dialects such as Black English vernacular (BEV) as signifying lack of intelligence. In the case of this population, men are often judged based on how they speak or their
articulation of a situation. One of the purposes of presenting their oral words here, as spoken, is to highlight that intelligence comes in many grammatical forms.

In the second half of this chapter, I compare the five men’s narratives and analyze themes in a cross-case analysis. By comparing the experiences of African American males that are on probation and graduated from high school, and their narrated accounts of life events that shaped their academic commitment, I am able to identify structural units to help think about the data, in order to present a general and sociological analysis. Labov’s method for analyzing narratives provides a structured method for identifying and exploring how the men themselves saw risk and protective factors, motivations and challenges, to have operated in their schooling and life experiences.

The Narrators and Their Narratives of School & Success

In this section, first I describe the participants’ demographic information, and then I present their narratives, one participant at a time, so the reader receives a full oral history of the participants. I conclude with a summary of their narratives told.

Participants’ Demographics

As outlined in the methodology section, I conducted interviews with ten African American males on probation for misdemeanors offenses in Toledo Municipal Court; data from five were selected for analysis. All of the participants attended and graduated from Toledo Public Schools (TPS). Grade point average (GPA) was not an identifying factor for participants to participate in the study. Recruitment flyers that explained the purpose of the study and that participation was completely voluntary were handed out to the probationers during their regular visits to their probation officers. None of the participants was on the researcher’s caseload. The criteria for participating in the study
included (1) being an African American male, (2) being on probation for a misdemeanor offense, (3) residing in an urban area, (4) having a high school diploma, and (5) being between the ages of 18-35. The rationale for choosing African American males on probation was to establish an academic history of sustained achievement achieved by these men who are overrepresented in the criminal justice system.

The five participants who are presented here ranged in age from 19 years to 32 years with a mean age of 29 years. All five participants graduated from high school within four years. Additionally, two participants attended two semesters each of college. Among the participants who were employed, only one currently held employment as a personal trainer. One received disability benefits from the military. Demographic information is presented in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name chosen by participant</th>
<th>Age at time of study</th>
<th>Employment at time of study</th>
<th>Family composition</th>
<th>Number of High Schools attended</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marcus</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>Single parent (mother)</td>
<td>One</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emir</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>Single parent (mother)</td>
<td>One</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaquelle</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>Single parent (mother)</td>
<td>Six</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Personal Trainer</td>
<td>Single parent (mother)</td>
<td>One</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antonio</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Veteran VA benefits</td>
<td>Single parent (mother)</td>
<td>Three</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

Demographic Information

Participants’ Narratives

The narratives below demonstrate how Marcus, Antonio, Anthony, Jaquelle and Emir presented narrative accounts in which they connected factors, techniques, skills and practices related to their experiences and success in their school. In the following
sections, the men’s narratives are included verbatim, in indented block quotes. As noted in the literature, many African American men experience involvement in the criminal justice system. The participants were chosen for sharing their experience; however, inquiring about the participants’ criminal involvement and what led to their involvement with the justice system would have been irrelevant and would have taken away from the purpose of the study. Thus readers will find little if any reference to involvement in the judicial system. This study is to gain a deeper understating of the participants’ perspectives on the influencing factors, and skills that they used in navigating their way through the educational system.

**Marcus.** At the time of the study, Marcus was a twenty-six year old who spoke with ease about his academic experience in high school. Marcus stated that his grandparents migrated from Mississippi, but he did not know why his family left the South. Marcus was raised by a single mother who did not graduate from high school and did not have a relationship with his father; thus Marcus did not know if he graduated from high school or how old he is. Marcus stated his family was middle class and his family moved three times during his K-12 academic experiences. Marcus also reported that there was no money nor time for extracurricular activities as he had to work at age 14. Marcus graduated from high in 1998 and attended three semester of community college.

When asked to identify a defining moment in his schooling, which impacted his graduating, Marcus told the following narrative:

[O]There was this one teacher I had.
[C] Like, I don’t know if it was done purposely or whatever, but it seemed like nothing was good enough, you know what I’m saying, was right for her. So, like no matter how much I studied or did whatever, I think it was a English teacher, I had to write a paper about something. She didn’t like my views on how I wrote the paper I thought they were correct.

[E] So, that could have been a turning point, but it just drove me to prove her wrong. Yeah. It just made me, like the next one would be better than the one I did that time.

[C] I talked to my mom because, you know what I’m saying, like I said, she read the paper before I turned it in. She thought it was a good paper. She is the one who told me it's not that big of a deal, because she knows what’s good.

[E] Like, she knows I did what I was supposed to do.

When I asked about factors that contributed to his academic success, Marcus explained:

[O] My parents was a big part of it. I always liked learning stuff anyway, so school wasn’t really I liked school

[C] Well, with my mother, she would always make sure my grades was right, good and stuff, because she didn’t graduate herself.

[E] So she always wanted her kids to graduate. To make it further in life than she did, you know?

[D] So then she just made--like I said, I already liked school anyway, so I got good grades. I know if I didn’t get a good grade I’d be in a lot of trouble, so—Well, when we came home from school, the first thing you did was your homework before you did anything else. That was a rule that she, yeah, she set up for us. Like, we couldn’t go
outside, couldn’t play, you know what I’m saying? Come home, do your homework, then do your chores, then do whatever the rest of the day.

When asked about teachers who impacted his schooling, Marcus identified two:

[O] One was a male and one was a female and both of them was white.

[C] I guess seeing how I like to learn stuff, and they liked how I, I don’t know, liked how I tried to do on my own, and if I couldn’t figure it out, I didn’t have a problem asking questions.

[E] So they helped me out a lot.

Marcus identified important support systems that contributed to his completing high school, in particular, his brother and sisters:

[O] They played a role, too, because I’m the oldest.

[C] If they needed help, I would always help them. Because like I said, it was easy for me, so I would be done with my homework fast, so it wasn’t that easy for my little sister.

[E] So all four of us graduated.

When discussing his thoughts about obtaining a high school diploma Marcus stated:

[O] It wasn’t really a big deal for me having it.

[C] I graduated but that was about it.

[E] It’s important that my kids know that I graduated high school so I can tell them they can do it.

[D] There is this lady. She didn’t graduate high school, and one time she was talking, and her and my girl was-- She said it wasn’t no big deal if her kids had a C average or if they didn’t graduate as long as they can get a job just doing
something. I was like, I was disappointed hearing that because you always want your kids to do better than what you did.

When asked about factors leading to current life success, Marcus stated they are:

[O] All your bills is paid, your kids are well taken care of, you know what I’m saying, food, all that, you know?

[C] All my bills is paid, like, we own our house, it’s not a struggle to live life. Everybody’s happy. That’s a good life to me.

[E] There are people that have a lot of stuff that think they have a miserable life. I believe it’s all on how you look at the situation.

[D] I think I’m pretty satisfied with my life.

**Antonio.** At the time of this research, Antonio was a 27-year-old who was honorably discharged from the military. Antonio stated that his grandparents moved the family from Mississippi so that their children would have a better life then what the South was offering African Americans at that time. Antonio was raised by his mother, who moved the family to Battle Creek, Michigan when she married his stepfather—a marriage that lasted only a short time—and when Antonio was a freshman in high school. Antonio became homeless during his freshman year in high school, but despite this, he graduated high school. Antonio considered his family’s socioeconomic status was middle class. Antonio stated that his family moved five to six times during the time he was a child and he attended three high schools.

Antonio, when asked about a defining moment in his schooling that could have impacted him to drop out, stated:

[C] And so we moved from Toledo up to Battle Creek, Michigan. And we all felt like my mom married this man too fast. It just seemed like they were married within two or three months after meeting each other and introducing us to him. So when we moved to Battle Creek, her husband and one of my brothers wasn’t getting along. I was on a broke leg, but he put my older brother out. And my mom stood by his decision. At that time I’d left, so now me and my brother was, I was actually in search to try to find my brother, track him down. We’re in a whole new state, whole new city. I didn’t just want to have him out there by his self. Even though she had me moving around. Missing a lot of days of school, so I started off behind. And my grades started to slip. And then they started telling me things like, You’ve got to come to the after-school program to get your grades up, take electives classes, all that. I didn’t have to do none of that.

[E] But once again, I was self-motivated to that bigger picture. But you’ve got to ask yourself the question, Do you want to graduate on time or not?

When asked about the factors to which he attributed to his academic success, Antonio stated the following:

[O] I didn’t have neither one of my parents around since I was 16. So my friends, the friends I chose, it was a strategic move on my behalf.

[C] Because instead of just choosing all the friends that was just popular and could fight, I made sure I chose some friends that didn’t mind going to the library or didn’t mind -- or didn’t feel like it was un-cool to sit up front. Those was who I drawn out to it was easier for me to ask them for help. Than just trying to go home and be like, well, I ain’t got nobody here and then end up putting it off.
[E] So your core base is really your friends because in high school that’s when you molding yourself kind of, of what you going to do or your likes and dislikes.

[D] So my friends, really that’s where it’s at. It takes a village like. I think people that don’t graduate as far as black African-American males, the friends that you choose, you choose to run with. Because they’re going to motivate you to do other things.

Antonio, when asked to describe teachers who impacted his academic success, described one teacher:

[O] I remember him, remember his name, too. B. E..¹ White male.

[C] But he was more urbanized, like. You would think he grew up in a Black home. I felt like he could see straight through me. One time he held me over after class. He already knew like what I’m going through and he knew I was trying to hide things. Like he knew I was struggling for money, I had nice clothes. He offered me cash for, I mean, an outfit that I had, knowing -- like really I don’t think he was going to wear it.

[E] But it was more of a fact like I’m not going to give you this, just give you this money, because he know I’m not going to just receive handouts like that.

The important support systems that Antonio identified that contributed to his completing high school was essentially himself:

[O] They didn’t--

¹ In the narratives, the men only named teachers who were positive influences; negative influences were not named, but only described. It would be nice to include these tributes by name; however, the IRB stated that pseudonyms would be used throughout, so teachers’ names are replaced with initials.
[C] Like I said, I couldn’t go home and ask my dad can you help me with something or ask my mom. Once again, my mom didn’t graduate, so now my education level has surpassed what you know.

[E] I think Black people can do whatever they put their mind to. Once they got their mind made up that’s what they want, whether it’s negativity, that’s what’s going to happen. That’s why people take our threat so serious, because they know once you make your mind up, it seem like we’re genetically constructed that way to get that task done.

[D] And in my mind, that’s what it was. I want to graduate.

When discussing his thought about obtaining a high school diploma, Antonio stated:

[O] I mean, I’m very glad I did it.

[C] Don’t get me wrong. Because that was a long, strenuous four years. I didn’t think I was going to make it. There was times to where, I mean, when you got hunger pains, I’m really not trying to be sitting in a class. You know, everybody had to listen to your stomach growling.

[E] I wouldn’t take it back for the simple fact that I see both sides of it and where my life’s going. I’m glad I did get my diploma because I’m not starting my own business or anything like that right now.

[D] So I would be a 29-year-old black man that don’t have a diploma, and society already look at us one way. And now you’re just falling right into that standard of an uneducated black man because what are you doing to make your money? If you don’t have a diploma, you’re not legitimately making an income, if you don’t have your own business. So where is this money coming from?
Discussing his current life success Antonio describes these successes as:

[O] Being able to take care of your essential needs. When you self-sufficient.

[C] Now you start taking away some of those things, you know, and that’s when it starts getting bad. But if you add a little bit more to those things, now you got a great life.

[E] I don’t got to have Tyra Banks at my house to feel like “I’m the man.” I may have Raggedy Ann if the love is real. She makes me feel like that. So a good life is just being able to look in the mirror and be honest with yourself that you’re doing everything on a day-to-day basis that you feel as though should be getting done because you the only person, you can’t lie to yourself.

**Anthony.** Anthony was a 31-year-old at the time of the research, who was born and raised in Toledo. Anthony reported he does not know when his family migrated from the South, as his grandparents died young. Anthony was raised by his mother who became a parent at the age of 16 when his sister was born. Anthony stated that he and she were the only siblings. Anthony stated his sister obtained her master’s degree; however, his mother and father did not graduate from high school. Anthony reported his family social economic status as middle class. He stated his mother worked three jobs to make sure that he and sister had the basic needs, including clothing, housing and food. Anthony recalled his family moving on two occasions from grade school through high school. Anthony stated that he only attended one high school and attended one elementary school.

In describing a defining moment in his schooling that could have impacted him to drop out or complete, Anthony stated:
[O] My mom, she came to me, she knew I was in the streets, and she came to me, like, Can you just please graduate?

[C] To be honest with you, and then just keeping all the way to one hundred with you, like I said, growing up in the neighborhood I grew up in, I ventured off into the streets. I was getting started getting money and, you know what I'm saying, so, and then I got caught.

[E] And it was to a point it was like man, either you go be that number, or is you go ahead and graduate and we say if you do go to jail, you got this. I said that's something they can't take from me forever. They can't ever take it, that I have a high school diploma, and I graduated, no matter what I got in my criminal background.

[D] And that was my moment right there. It was like, man, either you go do this or not, bro. And that's what I did.

When asked about the factors that he attributed to his academic success, Anthony stated the following:

[O] Well, first off, it was just a challenge, the neighborhood that I grew up in, the majority of all my peers, they was all in the streets selling drugs. To be different from that, even though I ventured off into that, but I still kept my course.

[C] I grew up over here in Detroit-Highland area, you know, where the crime rate was ridiculous, single mother, growing up, and just not to be a person like my dad. Like I said, even though I fell off into that, but I also kept my course. I stayed focused. Just to be different, and make my mom proud, you know. Not to be like my dad.
[E] My mom just asked me to do it, so I figured that's what I'd do to make her happy. Plus, to be different, you know. So it was challenging, but just to stay on course to graduate. A major factor just because she didn't graduate, so she wanted better for all four of her kids, which we all did. Just to make her proud and also, you know, to be different, and not be a statistic.

Anthony discussed with enthusiasm his experience with teachers who impacted his schooling, describing the experience as:

[O] Greatly, I mean they say public schools is really one of the worst schools. I beg to differ on that because they really cared. First there was Mrs. O, she was my senior English teacher she was white. And she, when I say, like, even though she knew what I was doing, she knew it, but she couldn't stop it. Nobody stopped it but me. And she said you have so much potential, and she was one of the greatest teachers. And Ms. D, Ms. D, she was a teacher there for years, she was Black.

[C] She wanted me, like she used to always tell me you got so much potential. You got so much potential. And she told me, like, she was trying to get me to enter the band. Everything just to keep me from going to the streets. But she knew what I was doing. Everybody knew, you know. But it's like they couldn't stop it. You understand, so, and they was just trying to get me stuff like, she knew I wasn't to go get in no band, but she like I didn't have to try out or nothing. They'll just put you in this band, so just give me something to do after school.

[E] To keep me away from the streets. So, that was one of the greatest teachers. And then my dean, K. M., you know, he was on me. Because they knew I had so
much potential. And they knew I loved knowledge. It wasn't till my senior year, but, you know, because they seen me from a freshman. They see me drifting. But they also seen me like the crowd I hung around, you know, my peers, they just knew like, man, you were different. There's something about you. [R] And she, when I say, like, even though she [Ms. D.] knew what I was doing, she knew it, but she couldn't stop it. Nobody stopped it but me. And she said you have so much potential. And she was one of the greatest teachers.

Anthony discussed his thoughts about obtaining a high school diploma as:

[O] Something they can't take from you. Nobody, so, just having it, makes you feel more important.

[C] On a different level, you know, my peers that I grew up with, the majority of them are in prison. A few of them dead, you know. And I'm not saying that I'm superior of them, but just something that makes me more appealing. I could have been dead. It was an incident, I was in school, and I'm getting out of school, and I walked through my neighborhood, and one of my friends landed on the ground shot. I mean lying on the ground, shot.

[E] I went to prison. Did two years, but I think that right there, by me, I could have probably had a prison number or a prison sentence before. Or a Department of Youth Services DYS number, whatever, before that, if I didn't take that eight hours of my time. If I wasn't, I know I would have been on that corner if I wasn't in school. So, I just missed it like by five minutes. Yeah, I mean, you know, when I think, it's just like school is the best.
[D] That's why I take my time to mentor young people, the younger generation. I do a lot of motivational speaking. I go to the schools, you know, so, and just my past experience of what I seen and what I been through, and let them know, man, you need this, you know what I'm saying. And I just think they need more after school programs. They need more like mentors, that's been in the game, that's been there. You know what I'm saying? And could teach these kids the man.

Anthony identified important support systems that contributed to his completing high school in particularly when discussing mother and sister:

[O] Like I said, my mom, you know, by her growing up crazy, she was 16 taking care of my sister.

[C] Her mom was a drug addict; her dad was a drug addict. Because her mom was a drug addict, her dad was a drug addict. So she took that experience and brung it over to us. She wasn't a drug addict, she was a hustler, not in the sense of the street, but a hustler, so she told us even though I didn't have the chance of doing this because she had to take care of my sister at an early age, I'm making sure that you all go to school and, even though it's not the best school, but I'm going to make sure you are in school and get that diploma. As far as my friends and my surrounding neighborhood, like they wasn't a support none of them they probably got their GEDs now. But we all 30-years-old, just now getting them, you know what I'm saying, so. Yes, it was because I didn't want to be like them. You know.

[E] So she took that experience and brung it over to us. I got an older sister. She got her Masters now. My sister, under her, she older than me, too, she got her
license in hair, you know, with a diploma. I feel like I was the man of the house, you know what I mean, because I was the oldest boy and, but my mom drilled that into us, to make it so that all of us graduated and got our diplomas. I didn't want to go out every day in the streets, man, you know, and that's why they got what they got. You know what I'm saying, because they made themselves, there's a saying you chase it long enough you're going to catch it. So they were chasing the street life and they caught it.

When discussing factors leading to his current life success, Anthony stated:

[O] Basically, for me, personally, life is with your kids, and living in a career, not a job. You know what I'm saying, a career.

[C] A career is something that you love to do. A job is something that you have to do to feed your family. And which is, whatever the case may be, but me personally, I feel like, and I was going to say Black males, that are a race, need careers. You get what I'm saying. You need a career -- you need that support system as far as your family or wife, you know, have morals.

[E] Being there for your family and do something that you love to do. I love to empower people. I love training people, as far as, you know, getting their health right, and all that. I love to do that. So I took up that career to do that.

**Jaquelle.** Jaquelle, at the time of this research, was a 19-year-old, who was born and raised in Toledo. Jaquelle reported that his mother graduated from high school and his father did not. He stated that he moved in with his father to complete high school. Jaquelle stated that his family economic status while growing up was below the poverty level, as they had utilities cut off during different times of his adolescent years. Jaquelle
reported that his mother moved several times during his school years, but his father had stable housing. Jaquelle reported that he attended several elementary schools and two high schools.

In describing a defining moment in his schooling that could have impacted him to drop out, Jaquelle stated:

[O] I took welding, the course welding, for high school for the trade I wanted to be in.

[C] I got into a predicament to where it was going to end up hurting my grade, like I failed it. And it was the hardest thing ever because we had just got done learning it and I couldn’t get the hang of it, trying to learn trades and stuff. And the moment it popped up and everything, I sat there. First I wanted to just quit the program.

[E] I end up talking to my teacher, and he ended up staying after school helping me out and getting practice with it and made me get better at it, and it got me through it, talking to my teacher and him helping me, It helped me start to think more like there’s somebody there that’s going to take the time out there to help you.

[R] So that’s what it got me through, it was like, I know there’s somebody always there that’s going to help me if I got a problem. The little situation that I was in got me through it was going to further help me out in college. Like something – it was like something that I was going to do for the rest of my life. The course I took was something that was going to further out through college.

Jaquelle identified the following factors that contributed to his academic success:
[O] I just wanted like to be something in life.

[C] So just like my main focus going into high school was to focus mainly on the books so I can understand something, have a good job as I’m getting older and stuff because the world as it is, is getting worse and stuff.

[E] It was like the first step to it, and then, you know, like going on to college and that it’s like going further and exceed to that next step. I want to be a part of this and make something happen with this world. My main focus going into high school was to focus mainly on the books so I can understand something.

Jaquelle discussed his experience with teachers who impacted his schooling as:

[O] He was a white male. Yes, sophomore, junior, and senior year I had that class with the same teacher.

[C] Yes, because he it was like, with him, he wasn’t like all teachers. He was like as a student. He never portrayed himself as a teacher. He acted just like one of them, but there were the times it felt like seeing that’s when he did his job, the one he hired to.

[E] Other than that, he was just like one of us because it felt like it was just all friends, you know, because played [indiscernible] he did the same things. It also made me get more of my structure. It was like [indiscernible] try to be in our lives and stuff, and that’s what I really liked about him. He portrayed himself at the same level as me. He talked to me as how like – how he’ll talk, how I would want somebody to talk to me. Basically then he treated me like how he wanted to be treated. And that’s what I like kind of liked about him, like. It brought us way
closer over the years and it just so happens to have a good little friend. There’s just like that connection there between us that brought us together.

Jaquelle identified his mother as the support systems that contributed to his completing high school:

[O] Oh, she was a big factor my mother.

[C] My father, he helped me too, he was a big factor in it, but like when I’m going to school and trying to help me, he couldn’t really do his best because he didn’t graduate. He dropped out. And he told me that if he could go back and redo it all over, he would. It sucks because you don’t get anywhere. My father, he was struggling like in certain situations. Like he was living good like, but in certain situations, he still was struggling because of not having that high school diploma. That he can’t get a good job like he wants to. And that’s why he was hard on me. I never really like saw that from his point of view. But then as the years go on and I got older, I really understood what he was saying. And it brought me and him a little bit closer, like more as like father-and-son.

[E] Every time like when I felt like giving up, she was always that person that always I can go to that will help me, take the time out of the day, stay up all nights with me if I needed help or something. It’s like, you know, you don’t really understand it growing up because it’s like, okay, you want to be a kid, you want to go have fun, so it’s like not really important; but then as you’re getting older, I started to realize things more because she kept saying it over and over to me. So I just let the process in my head that finally just took what she said and put it to use.

Jaquelle expressed his thoughts about obtaining a high school diploma as:
It felt good to me when I got my high school diploma. It was like I achieved everything I wanted to growing up, to what my parents got me through. So after that, it just made me get a better like this is not it, it’s not enough right now, so might as well take it and go forward to college and further my education so I can get a better job, so I can try to live in this world. I always just thought about this, that finally happen. To where I’m just financially set because I always just thought about this, everything you build, just because you finished everything, go through school; get the schooling process of your knowledge so then where I can just enjoy my rest of my life.

When discussing what he thought of his current life success, Jaquelle stated:

To me having a good life is making sure I’ll never be able to struggle again. Like I’m financially set moneywise; I have a place, a roof over my head, my own transportation; I have a good job.

Again, if I have that little significant other or start a family, then that would come all into it; it would be like I’m all situated for everything that’s prepared to happen. If anything goes bad or something, that our needs -- like fixing anything, I have money to get it situated or I can do what I can to try to fix that, you know, if it’s not particularly with money. You know, like just making it in life, just enjoying every moment. Like and spending every moment like it’s your last, like Go out with a bang. Like I don’t do bad stuff, but like I just make sure I have fun at any given moment because you never know when it can be your last. So that’s how I always think about it, just like I have a good life so the day that I die I can be like I had fun while it lasted.
Emir. At the time of this research, Emir was a 32-year-old, who was born in Toledo, Ohio. Emir stated that neither of his parents graduated from high school. Emir stated that he is an only child, and described his family as average when it comes to income. Emir stated that he was raised by his mother, their housing was stable and they moved one or two times while growing up. Emir reported there was enough food and money for clothing. Emir also reported there was enough money for school supplies and extracurricular activities. Emir stated he attended two elementary school, and one high school. Emir reported attending two semester at Owens Community College, stating he did not complete but wants to go back and complete his degree.

In describing a defining moment in his schooling that could have impacted him to drop out Emir stated:

[O] The things you take like during the end of the year you got to pass before.
Yeah, the OGTs [Ohio Graduation Tests].

[C] For a lot of kids because if they don't pass them. They be looking forward to getting that high school diploma, so I'm feeling like that might be a reason why a lot of the kids don't graduate. Because in one state, they feel like they fail the OGTs, they don't want to go to school. Isn’t anything else to do.

[E] That was my main thing was pass my OGTs. I hit the books a little harder and, you know, got to distanced myself away from certain situations that I was around, you know what I'm saying, To get the grade that I needed, you better do a whole lot better and then you got to pass two out of three. So everybody be striving to pass those two semesters. That way you ain't got to take that exam.

Emir described the factors that contributed to his academic success as:
Factors were I needed to graduate. I wanted to make my mom and them proud.

It was rough though. Don't get caught up in the same situation everybody else in. Go a whole entirely different way. Be a leader, not a follower. So and it worked out fine.

When talking about teachers who impacted his schooling, Emir stated:

Grade school I had a teacher he was like hands on. African American

He definitely stood out because a lot of teachers they don't, you know what I'm saying, they kind of teach and then they don't too much ever care about the academics or what the student got going on. You know what I'm saying, they could do more they just, you know, they got their own life so they just come to school, teach and go. So he kind of stood out, you know.

He would have activities for the kids. His name was Mr. W. Teach you how to play with the hydraulics on the cars and then have car shows and that kept us out of a lot of trouble growing up. All the kids like after-school activities; he was just teaching you something that you can just carry on through life. So to this day, I still be doing like model cars and stuff.

Emir identified the support systems that were most influential in contributing to him completing high school as the following:

Well I'm an only child.

My mother she definitely stayed on me and made sure that I went to school, just butt-whoopings and all of that, if you stayed home. You know like a lot of households they don't got that family drive behind it. I ain't really hanging with no
brothers and sisters in the household. So it was basically all on me. Either what you want to do or you not going to do.

[E] I decided to get my high school diploma besides being an old bum around here, you know, not get a high school diploma, then you got to fight to get a GED. If that don't work then I don't get nothing. We had different little things like the Frederick Douglass Center. They have different things for us to do, academic wise. The Link Center down on Hawley Street. They had like different stuff for you to do. That is the major part, you know like you need things in your community that will help. Even if you don’t have that family orientated at home you got a community center where you can go.

Emir, when discussing his thoughts about obtaining a high school diploma, described those thoughts as:

[O] My thoughts on obtaining it, it was a great accomplishment for me on the timing and it was something that I strived for. You know what I'm saying, accomplished my goal so It was all right.

[C] I don't think it made no difference, you know what I'm saying? Only thing is you know I'm part of that 47% that graduated, you know what I'm saying, that's the difference, you know, but otherwise like if you don't keep striving, like you might get a high school diploma, but you got to keep striving. I mean it's nothing, it's just you know what I'm saying, you graduate high school.

[E] I don't think being a black male made a difference, you know what I'm saying, but you got the high school diploma so I mean anybody, you know, you can strive to get it. But has it made a difference, you know, like you got to after you get it,
you gotta just keep pushing yourself, you know what I'm saying, to go farther. You know what I'm saying, it don't do no good when you go out for jobs or whatever, and they be like you got a high school diploma? And you, you know what I'm saying, you can show them that paper that you got it, you know what I'm saying. That's the satisfaction of it.

When explaining factors that relevant to his current life success, Emir stated:

[O] A good life? I can't even say it's stress-free
[C] Because you can have a whole lot of money and it still be stressful and not happy. I mean, a good life is all what you make it, You got to strive to just, you know, do better in life, you know.
[E] I got a kid so I want to give him a better life than what I had growing up. I strive a little harder to get in that good life. But the good life is just for real is a lot what you make it. You can have a lot of money. You can be a poorer man and still have a good life. So it's just all what you make it. How good you want your life. So it just all basically revolve around you.

**Summary of Participants’ Narratives**

Within these experiences of the participants, we can discern commonalities that educators, researchers and others working with African American males want to use to guide them in closing the educational gap of a marginalized group, as will be analyzed in the next section. Here, the following summary is organized according to the domains from the individuals’ narratives, which follow the interview questions asked: (a) the defining moment that impacted their academic schooling, (b) teachers impact, (c) their
thoughts on education, (d) support systems, (e) thoughts on obtaining a high school diploma, and (f) current life success.

The participants’ experiences regarding defining moments that they believed could have impacted their graduating or not can be divided into two categories, personal relationships and academics. The personal relations involved a teacher’s relationship for two of the participants, and mother’s relationship for three of the participants; the academic moment for one involved a course and for another, passing the state required exam. As a result, in responding to these moments the participants demonstrated resiliency, which kept them focused on their educational goals and desires to graduate from high school: Marcus, Antonio, and Anthony identified personal relationships contributing to important factors in helping them avoid dropping out of school during their crucial moment. Jaquelle and Emir identified related academics, course work and Ohio graduate exams as challenging moments in pursuit of their high school diploma.

The participants identified two categories when discussing factors that contributed to their academic success: personal relationships and self-motivation. Marcus, Anthony and Emir identified their mothers as the most important contributing factors in their academic success. Antonio once again identified peer association as the most influential factor in his academic success. Jaquelle identified self-motivation as the contributing factor to him completing high school.

The participants identified teachers who impacted their schooling. When educators internalize negative depictions of African American male students, there is great potential for them to operate according to beliefs, which may result in transmitting low expectation to these students. However, the participants, through their narrations of
teachers’ involvement, showed that when teachers do just the opposite they have an
tremendous impact on students’ academic success. The participants gave the following
demographic descriptions of their teachers who influenced their academic success:
Marcus identified a white male and female teachers, Antonio stated it was a white male
teacher, Anthony identified two females teachers, one white and the other African
American, Jaquelle identified a white male teacher, and Emir discussed an African
American male teachers who played an important role in his academic success.

The important support systems that contributed to the participants’ completion of
high school reflected differences in communities’ experiences have drastically impacted
students educational achievements, as noted by Stewart (2007): “[A]ccording to
ecological theory, an individual’s environment consist of several co-occurring or nested
levels that interact to influences human development” (p.18). The participants discuss
critical support systems that helped them complete high school. Marcus stated that he was
the eldest child, so he had to be a positive support system for younger brothers and
sisters, which shows that Marcus understood the importance of being a positive role
model. Antonio identified his peers as a stable support system contributing to his
completing high school. Anthony, Jaquelle and Emir mentioned the importance of their
mothers playing a crucial role in them completing high school.

The participants gave varying responses about their thoughts on obtaining a high
school diploma. These responses can help answer inaccurate thoughts and beliefs about
African American male students’ commitment to education. These African American
male students did care about education despite what is consistently reported in the
literature regarding their gradual disinvestment in schooling. Four of the participants,
Antonio, Anthony, Jaquelle and Emir, felt that obtaining their high school diploma was one of the proudest moments in their lives. Only Marcus stated obtaining his high school diploma was no big deal for him, as school was easy for him, but he emphasized that it was important for him to be able to tell his kids he graduated from high school so he can tell them they can do it.

Finally, the participants described factors as indicating current life success. Sociological research suggests that African American male success must become a national concern and be treated as an emergency. The current research is in keeping with that tradition of documenting the overlooked from the point of view of the overlooked. The participants’ description of their current life successes gives rise to their level of motivation to pursue their quality of life standards. Marcus stated his current life success is being able to pay his bills. Antonio stated his current life success is being able to take care of his essential needs. Anthony indicate life success to him is having a career, not a job. Jaquelle stated that his current life success is making sure he never has to struggle again. Emir stated his current life success is being able to provide his children a better life then he had. The response to current life success shows that the participants place values on current life success as do others.

**Cross-Case Analysis**

In the previous section, I analyzed the men’s narratives using narrative analysis techniques as indicated in the life story narratives. To analyze themes across the cases, I focused on the evaluation statements in the narratives (marked [E]). I coded them using emergent coding (that is, sticking close to the words and meanings they gave), and then
organized these emergent codes according to \textit{a priori} categories based on my research questions and the literature.

As detailed in chapter 3, I went back through all the transcripts, focusing on evaluation statements, and marked them with codes. I created a coding structure, and included definitions and exemplars. I provided definitions after each code, and listed the exemplars, with citations, under each code. The following sections discuss the major themes that this coding revealed and that should be of most use to educators and others working with African American males. The evaluations in the narratives identify specific patterns of behaviors and uncover new themes of successful African American males who graduated from high school and are on probation. In examining the skills, techniques, and other factors that African American males utilize to graduate from high school, this research will help educators, court personnel, parents, community members, and perhaps students themselves.

\textbf{Culturally Relevant Teachers}

Educators must begin to look for and acknowledge African American males’ culture to discover what Parson and Kritsonis (2006) refer to as “hidden rules” these young men bring to learning forum as a result of poverty. The participants’ expressions of teachers who impacted their academic success validate Parson and Kirtsonis’s (2006) suggestion of acknowledging African American males’ culture. According to Davis (2011) “cultural relevant teaching requires that educators understand and appreciate the cultural backgrounds of students of color bring to school. Culturally relevant teaching across cultures is vastly rewarding and effective.” As noted above, the five participants referred to both Black and White, and male and female teachers. Thematic analysis
revealed that of the teachers who impacted their academic success all seemed to have taken into account the participants desire to achieve academically as Black males. Antonio stated his White male teacher was culturally sensitive to his needs as an African American male student. When educators become culturally aware of others culture, which culture is the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, and all other products of human work and thoughts, they build students’ self-esteem and confidence. Marcus, Jaquelle and Anthony expressed similar cultural awareness from their teachers: Jaquelle stated his teacher respected him, Anthony stated his teacher showed self-awareness and Marcus stated his teachers offered guidance which led to his accepting their help. Emir stated that his elementary teacher, through cultural awareness that the practical skills of understanding hydraulics were of most relevance and interest to his students, taught them life lessons.

Thus the participants all identified factors among teachers that were important to the participants and that helped them graduate from high school. Marcus stated his positive relationship with his teachers instilled confidence in him to accept their guidance. Antonio added, his teacher’s acknowledging and accepting of his culture was very instrumental in his academic success. Anthony stated his teachers provided a sense of support which resulted in him developing self-awareness towards his academic studies. Jaquelle added, “my teachers developed an environment where I felt respected.” Emir commented that his teachers created a learning environment that allowed him to learn life lessons.
Personal Resilience

The findings further revealed that there were two types of resilience utilized by the participants. Gayles (2005), as discussed in chapter two, offered an excellent definition for resilience: “for the purpose of the research presented here, academic resilience is defined as academic achievement when such achievement is rare for those facing similar circumstances or within a similar context. In this sense, resilience is treated as an outcome with two forms: The first was identified as internal resilience, where the participant’s innate characteristic emerged. The second form of resilience that was identified was requiring support from others in developing resilience. Four of the participants utilized internal resilience, Marcus, when he encountered teacher’s rejections, responded to prove her wrong. He said explicitly, “I worked to prove her wrong.” Hence the negativity of the teacher was the external motivating factor. Antonio, when he was put out of the home by his stepfather, responded with self-motivation: even though he became homeless, he completed high school. Anthony, who was involved in “the streets,” responded by self-determination: he recognized the process of controlling and changing his life was up to himself. Emir, who struggled with the OGTs and widespread fear of failing them, responded with self-motivation to pass the state test: as he said, he “wasn’t going to give up.” Jaquelle’s difficulty with a class led him to accept support from a teacher, which inspired to become more motivated to pass his class.

This second domain describes the emergent theme arising from factors the participants attributed to their academic success. The five participants identified various unique indicators that were contributing factors that helped them remain academically successfully. The factors were identified and utilized despite juggling systemic issues
such as cultural differences, peer influence, environmental influences, and social economics status (SES) to graduate from high school. Marcus stated that he recognized an educational dilemma and which he responded by developing study skills. Antonio added his contributing factor was identification of his overall goals and he utilized peer influence. Anthony added mother’s approval, which resulted in him buckling down to complete his school work. Jaquelle added the following. He wanted to be a positive influence in the world and he responded by exceeding to the next academic level. Emir added, the contributing factor was a since of nonfulfillment, which resulted in him wanting to become a leader. The theme that emerges from the contributing factors that help the participants complete high school is sustained motivation. The participants were able to correlate factors that were important to them to help sustain their academic pursuit.

Valuing of Education

The emerging cross-case analysis showed why the participants care so much about education despite of literature that indicates their gradual disinvestment in schooling. Marcus emphasized the importance of being able to tell his children that he completed high school, and they can, too. Antonio added, “it was a strenuous four years,” but his thoughts are that “I wouldn’t take it back, there are both sides and he sees where his life is going with a high school diploma.” Anthony emphasized, “It’s something they can’t take away.” Jaquelle stated that in obtaining a high school diploma, he “achieved everything he wanted, and that he used it to further his education.” Emir stated that “obtaining his high school diploma was “a great accomplishment” for him and that he is proud of being “part of that 47% who have graduated from high school.”
emerging them presented in this section is the participants’ belief about self. The participants articulated an acute awareness their individual qualities of valuing a high school diploma.

**Importance of Support Networks**

Another important theme to emerge from cross-case analysis is the support networks to which the participants attributed their academic success. The participants discussed significant relationships with at least one parent figure in addition to important relationships with siblings, peers and teachers that were important to them obtaining their high school diploma. Marcus had a reversal of roles when he discussed his support systems, stating that his younger siblings looked up to him, so he was a positive support system for him which helped him stay focused to graduate from high school. Antonio noted that his support system was his positive peer association, while Anthony identified that his mother was support system for him and through her desire to get her children through school strengthen their bond. Jaquelle identified his young sister as a support system for him: in her academic pursuit of excellence, he molded her behavior. Emir added, it was his mother as well that was a support system, as he did not want to be a bum. For all but one, Emir, the emerging them from the domain that resulted is a cross section analysis is a connection of all similar themes of all the participants. The theme reveals a complexity of family and peer relationships in helping the participants to complete high school.

**A Paradox in School and Life Success**

The final theme revealed through cross-case analysis lies in how the participants negotiated life and experienced success after completing high school, while being
involved in the criminal justice system. The finding yields a paradox of value of life success. Marcus stated his experience of success is “not having to struggle.” Antonio added, his current success is “not all that great,” as he is “struggling to obtain a quality of life.” Anthony said that his current life success is “being there for his family.” Jaqualle described his current life success as “enjoying every moment of life like it’s your last.” Emir added another dimension, describing his current life success is being “stress free.” The emerging theme from the cross analysis demonstrated differences in the participants’ ideas about success and involvement in the criminal justice system as four of the participants expressed an emerging theme of finding a balance between economic freedom and happiness.
Chapter Five

Conclusion

This chapter summarizes, interprets, discusses implications, and makes recommendations upon African American males’ ideas about school success, challenging the overwhelmingly negative literature on low academic achievements of African American males, which has presented a hopeless picture of reversing long standing trends of academic failure for African American males, and also placing the men’s school and life success back into the social context of a society which continues to fail to accord African American males with the human rights that should belong to all citizens of the United States. The summary provides a description of the African American male participants who at the time of this study were on probation and who had been academically successful, highlighting the strategies, techniques, and fortitude and resilience they needed to graduate from high school. The interpretation reveals what the five African American males who were on probation perceived as contributors to their academic success. As has been detailed in the previous chapter, the participants identified factors such as skills, techniques, knowledge, and support systems, as well as how they negotiated life and experience success after completing high school while being involved in the criminal justice system. The implications discuss what the study revealed about the participants and their commitment to education, and how this challenges dominant culture narratives, as well as how their counternarratives of success highlight the precarious nature of even successful African American males’ survival in a racist society.
Finally, recommendations for future studies of African American boys and men in school and in society will be made.

Summary

The primary purpose of this research study was to investigate how a group of African American males whose success is regularly ignored experienced educational success in high school and life success after graduating from high school. A secondary purpose of this research was to investigate how these African American males graduated from high school when faced with the same social and systemic conditions faced by their counterparts, who do not graduate from high school.

This research focused on five African American males who had been placed on probation for minor misdemeanor charges and who had graduated from high school. The purpose of focusing on this population was that many African American males do graduate from high school, and still are involved in the criminal justice system. It is this discrepancy that is the major focus as discussed in chapter 2: this population is largely absent from the literature, but the literature is relevant to it.

Three of the participants attended one high school during their high school years, and one attended two high schools and one attended six high schools. One participant reported attending one elementary school, three participants reported attending two elementary school and one participant reported attending four elementary schools. None reported being in special education; grades were not considered as success was defined by graduating. Only one participant reported one year of college. Although socioeconomic status was not a factor in the research, all of the participants lived in neighborhoods that were below the federal poverty level.
The researcher’s findings in the study noted common themes and patterns related to academic success among the participants. Among the participants, academic success meant obtaining knowledge to be successful, self-motivated, and future achievement. The factors influencing the participant’s academic success include mothers involvement, peer support, caring teachers, recognitions of achievement, and understanding of self-determination. This study explored factors the participants perceived contributed to academic success, which are summarized here in the context of the existing literature.

**Key Factors that Contributed to Completing High School**

The result of the study indicated similarities in the factors the participants contributed to them completing high school. They associated contributing factors as support of family, positive peer and negative association, and being able to obtain a job and basic survival, teachers influence, self-determination, self-image, and extra curriculum activates. Previous research confirmed that successful African American males credited their academic success to supportive mothers and their determination to succeed (Robinson & Werblow, 2012). It is important to understand how variables affect academic success for African American males students who are struggling academically. Therefore, it is beneficial to explore factors contributing to African American males’ academic performance from their own views. The study revealed key factors in the participants graduating from high school and what implications were noted to this achievement. One key factor noted from the study was the different forms of resilience the participants used to obtain their high school diploma. For many African American students, especially those educated in urban or inner-city schools. Academic success is
contingent on their ability to demonstrate resilience in the face of racism, poverty, and environments with few resources (Griffin and Allen, 2006).

The participants also revealed that they developed what Duckworth called “grit.” Duckworth (2016) noted that grit is more about stamina than intensity, holding the same goal for a long time. The participants through graduating from high school exhibited this grit. What Duckworth noted is that when you consider individuals in identical circumstances, what each achieves depends on just two things, talent and effort. Talent in how fast you improve in skill absolutely matters. But effort factors into the calculation twice, not once. Effort builds skill. At the same time, effort makes skills productive.

**Individuals Who Impact Success**

Four of the five participants in the current study perceived the role of their mothers, peers and educators as contributing factors to them graduating from high school. Peer influence and peer support were the major themes emerging from the resulting data. The participants in this study recognized peer influence and peer support as important elements in their academic success. In this study, three of five participants reported having a positive identity with their peers. Peers were influential and could be either a positive force or a negative force in factors contributing to the participants graduating from high school. Peers, at time, had a strong impact on participants’ decision-making. In some instances, participants only had peers to listen to for advice. In other instances, the participants were able to evaluate negative peer behavior to avoid negative consequences that could have affected their academic success. The finding also showed that the race of peer support was not a factor in who the participants chose as their peer support.
Several themes emerged from the resulting data concerning the mother's role in the participant’s ability to achieve academic success. The data revealed the importance of each participant’s mother’s encouragement, mother’s involvement and support, and mother’s expectations. Participants recognized the connection between mothers’ support and being academically successful. All of the participants were products of a single-parent upbringing, in household consisting of a mother and/or grandmother. All participants reported the value of getting a high school diploma was stress in their household. In some participants’ households, their mothers did not graduate from high school, but their mothers or grandmothers encouraged their academic achievement by telling them to do their best, remain focused, and work toward their goals for a better life. This encouragement from mothers gave the participants the drive to succeed.

Robison and Weblow (2012) found that African American males from single household raised by their mothers showed high educational outcomes when their mothers visited the school, were involved in school activities, and had high expectations for their son’s educational goals. Four of the participants in this study similarly reported having a mother involved with their education, which motivated them to succeed. When parents reinforced the value of completing high school, this expectation manifested in the behavior of the participants, and it made a difference in their performance at school. Overall mother’s encouragement, mother’s involvement/support, and mother’s expectations were reported to be related to participants’ internal incentive mechanism to achieve.

Research pertaining to the role of educators helping African American male students succeed indicates that emphasis should be placed on encouraging positive school
experiences, motivating students to reach their potential, creating a bond with students, and understanding their unique culture background (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Several themes emerged from the resulting data concerning role of teachers in the participant’s ability to graduate from high school. The emerging themes were caring and supportive teachers, teachers meeting individual needs, and teachers understanding cultural environment. Stewart (2007) stated a cohesive school environment has a positive effect on the academic achievement of African American students. Findings in this study indicate that teachers should thoroughly explain material, give extra help after school, and become culturally competent to African American male students. This study indicates that teachers must be willing to invest their extra effort, staying after school, and helping African American males realize their academic potential: three of the participants emphasized that extracurricular activity kept them from becoming involved in destructive activity.

**Importance of Goal of Obtaining a High School Diploma**

The themes identified here represent the participants’ thoughts on obtaining a high school diploma. Prior educational research shows that when students formulate positive cognitive thoughts about educational goals the outcomes are usually positive. Harper and Davis (2012) concluded that notwithstanding their awareness of how U.S institutions persistently disadvantaged them, African American males have a positive outlook in the power of education. The results of this study indicated that participants formulated their educational goal in elementary school, which helped them to stay focused throughout high school. The participants also credited self-determination, mothers’ influence, and persistent positive interaction with teachers. The findings
indicate that there is a positive correlation between formulating positive educational goals and academic achievement. This suggest to the researcher that goal setting is an important ingredient for striving for academic achievement.

**Defining Moments**

Griffin and Allen (2006) noted resilient students are able to translate difficult environment into a source of motivation by maintaining expectation and aspiration, and being goal-oriented. Participants in this study noted self-determination, supportive educational environments, extra-curricular activities, and the aspirations of jobs and survival as key to overcoming challenging social of environmental moments that placed their educational goals at risk.

**Negotiating and Defining Life Success**

Previous research studies found African American males investment is schooling is contingent on their belief that education will led to improved life chances such as better jobs and higher wages, social status, and self esteem Harris (2008). Success is usually not a word associated with young African American men, the participants did reveled that they feel that they are successful. Although participants expressed different current life success, four noted current life success for them is being able to take care of their families, being happy with who they are. Also, the findings indicated that the participants reviled current life success as being a positive contributor to society, not having to struggle, enjoying life. The participants cited many import factors to their current life success: self-belief, hard work, self-motivation, goal-setting. All the participants with the exception of one viewed current life success as positive and rewarding.
The shared nature of being African American males beset the participants with societal obstacles that they had to overcome. Chapman (2011) noted in discussing Critical Race Theory (CRT) that legal system’s practical functions are impacted primarily by race and further complicated by gender and class issues in society. According to Chapman, CRT portrays dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, color blindness, and meritocracy as camouflages for self-interest of powerful entities of society.

The participants’ limited understanding on inequity can be summarized with reference to Ladson-Billings and Tate’s (1995) presentation of CRT. They noted three central propositions of social inequity: (a) race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in the United States, (b) U.S. society is based on property rights and (c) the interaction of race and property creates an analytic tool through which we can understand social (and, consequently school) inequity (p. 48). This version of CRT’s central propositions helps us to look at the men’s ideas of success, and understand that the boundaries of their ideas about success are not set by their own dreams or abilities, but rather by the structural framework of racism and access to resources that limits what is possible for them to attain.

**Interpretation of the Findings**

How were the participants able to obtain academic success and develop skills, techniques, and knowledge to be able to recognize and utilize support systems in their pursuit of their high school diploma? Using a critical race theory framework to focus the answer to this question leads us to pay attention to the men’s stories as counter narratives to a dominant culture narrative of failure, and to consider how race and property rights on the societal level affect their personal resilience, as well as their experiences of and ideas
about success. The participants’ struggles to graduate from high school centered on obtaining a high school diploma to be successful, visions of future achievement, and self-motivation. The findings in this study supported previous research studies that African American male students’ desire to achieve an education, seen here as the participants’ determination to graduate from high school and their desire to have a career, is directly related to academic achievement. The findings revealed that the participants perceived that if they stayed in school, good things would happen to them economically. This study added to the literature and reveled new emergent themes on how the participants were able to stay focused in environments that challenged them daily. It is extremely important that African American males see positive influences in their lives, as these influences set the tone for how they believe that they too can be academically successful.

**Cultural Identity, and Cultural and Social Capital**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) points to the centrality of race and property, i.e., access to resources, in any consideration of social process, including schooling. Property or resources include cultural capital and social capital (Kincheloe, 1993), both of which can be “invested” toward success in school and in career. Both cultural capital and social capital relate to cultural identity. Participants talked about identity in terms of “the hood” (where they had social capital) and commented on teachers who “seem to get it” (as in they recognized the students’ cultural capital). Notable here is that teachers “getting it,” or acknowledging the students’ capital, was only occasional, and not all of the participants experienced it at all: a teacher here and there affirmed cultural identity, but that was the exception. It was very much on an individual teacher rather than a systemic school level: the participants did not note anything that indicated a wide spread, top-
down, concerted effort to affirm cultural identity. Instead, it was up to individual students and teachers. Critical race theorists have noted that in the U.S., whiteness itself is “property” which is valued as a commodity and can be invested under a capitalist system (Chapman, 2011, p. 224). It is owned and can be invested—it is cultural capital. In the case of these young men, their blackness is not valued as property, and in general cannot be invested under the capitalist system. This can be seen in the lack of willingness of some educators to invest fully in black students so they can become economically sustainable. It is only the rare teacher that understands the economy of blackness, or of “the hood,” and invests in it: Antonio’s teacher did.

**Resilience**

The counternarrative to this deculturalization and devaluing is found in the stories of what educational psychologists would call resilience. Research on resilience was discussed in detail in chapter 2, but in general, as Williams and Portman (2014) explained, educational resilience is the ability of adolescents to succeed in school despite exposure to personal and environmental adversities. All participants in the study exhibited forms of resilience during their pursuit of their high school diplomas. Has the study revealed a formula for identifying and cultivating resilience? No. However, the study has revealed the individual counternarratives of each participant that show how he utilized his own forms of resilience in achieving his academic goals. The participants’ academic resilience runs counter to the dominant culture’s narratives that African American males are not invested in their educational goals. These dominant narratives tell that young men who are involved in the criminal justice system are there due to their own lack of investment in their educational process. Again, CRT provides a useful
window to interpret their situations: if blackness is not recognized as having value, then the young men’s investments of their cultural resources, i.e., their methods of resilience, are not going to be recognized as investments or as something they cultivate.

Though the study revealed no formula for resistance, it did attune us to paying attention to the many different ways, or different counternarratives, of the young men’s efforts that resulted in resilience. Many of the participants conveyed through their dialogue how resilience helped them stay focused in pursuit of earning a high school diploma for future goals. This orientation always to the future and the economic opportunities it would hold is a key finding the study, particularly, as will be discussed below, when those future economic opportunities did not materialize as the participants expected. Specifically, resilience for all the participants revolved around the goal of someday having a good job, of being able to survive, and of realizing the need for self-determination. For example, during our dialogue, Jaquelle shared, “I just wanted to be something in life.” Emir similarly expressed his own form of resilience when discussing the defining moment that could have impacted his not graduating from high school. In response to it, he said, “I hit the books a little harder.” Anthony summed it up when he noted that his goal had been “a career,” which is “something that you love to do,” whereas he and most black men have had to settle for “a job,” which “is something that you have to do to feed your family.”

CRT’s focus on property and access to resources also allows us to focus on the young men’s resilience in different forms. According to Harris (1995):

Whiteness defined the legal status of a person as slave or free. White identity conferred tangible and economically valuable benefits, and it was jealously
guaranteed as a valuable possession…. [T]he right to White identity as embraced by the law … is property if by property, one means all of a person’s legal rights. (pp. 280-281)

Slaves were property and therefore more valuable as a commodity than any other commodity during the slave period. Scholarship has well documented the value of property as noted when slaves came from Africa. CRT emphasizes that race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequality in the United States because of this legacy of viewing African Americans as property instead of as having property. Because the participants are not seen as having property, i.e., intellectual property recognized as having cultural capital as defined by the dominant culture, they have to cobble together their own means of survival and means for investing in the future. This is their resilience. The participants are well aware of the value of property, when discussing current life success. Three of the participants stated that having your own home is seen as success and their resilience to graduate from high school was motivated in large part by their desire to put themselves in a position to obtain the American dream (home ownership), that is, it was motivated through their individual resilience.

The American Dream and Structural Racialization

“Structural racialization” names the “system of social structures that produces and reproduces cumulative, durable, race-based inequalities” (Grassroots Policy Project, n.d., p. 4). African American men are the highest unemployed group in America even when unemployment numbers are low for the nation. Thus, education was not a golden ticket out of poverty for those in the study. Having achieved and sustained high school success, the participants in this study described an array of crucial moments that could have
impacted them to complete high school or drop out, all while coping and managing social conditions that placed them at risks. The participants found themselves navigating multiple forms of protection, and their responded depended, in part, on how each viewed himself, both individually and collectively. However, the participants developed their own sense of a good life that fits their values. The participants also discussed how their success in high school had affected their lives post-high school. They identified the importance of a high school diploma, and the struggles to get it. Ultimately, academic achievement was not identified by the participants as an end in itself but as a means to an end. The participants’ desires of academic achievement created a transformative bridge between the participants and their hopes of a better life through education. This did not necessarily end with high school graduation, but for some extended to hopes for college: as Jaquelle said, “It was like everything I achieved, everything I wanted growing up, it’s not enough, so might as well take it and go forward to college and further my education so that I can get a better job.” These participants believed that if they graduated from high school they would have a better life. However, after achieving their academic goal, only one of the five participants was employed and he was self-employed as a personal trainer, so had little job security, no benefits, and no social security, that is, no safety net in the present or for the future.

The civil rights movement captured the imagination of civil rights activists and their concern over major economic reforms which were needed because a vast majority of Americans at the time remained locked in poverty. As the nation embark on the twenty-first century, one of the oldest persistent inequalities that America must come to terms with is how education continues to be a social concern. The relationship between
race and academic achievement of students of color, particularly African American males, persists today with many of the same and some new social problems. I have suggested addressing this dilemma from a human rights perspective in contrast to a civil rights perspective. Martin Luther King’s (1967) ideological shift during the Poor People’s Movement, when he argued that the time has come for a shift from a civil rights to a human rights paradigm to address the right to food, shelter, health care, education and security. As noted in chapter one, all citizens should have, as a basic human right, access to schooling that allows them to develop fully, and to create themselves. The quality of life tends to be highly correlated with one’s educational attainment. African American males are currently experiencing the least success of academic achievement of any other group in the U.S., and this has contributed to their lack of overall quality of life. When talking about what education means as a human right, as noted in chapter one, the primary notion can be derived from Nussbaum’s (2001) capabilities approach. Nussbaum argues all humans have a right to certain resources to pursue their life plan, and education is a resource that is invaluable in reaching one’s fullest potential. Therefore, using a capabilities approach, education is a human right.

We have to look at the history of education and where it has brought us as a society. Chapman (2011), from a critical race theory perspective, has noted, “The forging of the U.S.A. through the oppression, dominance, and annihilation of people of color is stitched into the fabric of the country; and this history creates binaries and hierarchies of race, class, and gender that remain woven in the laws, policies, and social understanding that shape the country” (p. 220). After slavery, literacy skyrocketed. But two decades later, when the Reconstruction efforts had largely been undone, Woodson
(1993) noted the fragile position of African Americans in society due to schools not serving the needs of African Americans. This “mis-education,” and the lack of opportunity in the working world that it initiated, created conditions for emergence and solidification of the dominant narrative that African American males are shiftless and not motivated, and that this is the individual’s fault. According to this narrative, because of the individual students’ lack of interest in the educational process, schools are not to blame and it is appropriate that these individuals are overrepresented in the criminal justice system. Most recently at this time of writing, Donald Trump on the campaign trail echoed these sentiments of the dominant narrative when discussing the African American communities, claiming, “Your schools are no good, you have no jobs, and your neighborhoods are crime-infested” (*New York Times*, August 2016).

The participants’ narratives as presented and analyzed in this study strongly suggest that school is not set up to meet their needs as African American males, and in this concluding chapter, I assert that this is due to schools not being designed to be of value to African American males and to serve their purposes. The narratives of the participants show that they valued getting a diploma enough to make sacrifices; however, the sacrifices they made and the diplomas they earned did not lead them to “the good life” as defined by the dominant culture. The narratives showed that the participants had some sense of personal success and a great deal of personal integrity in that they felt good about themselves and could take care of their families; however, as Nussbaum (2001) supports, this is a matter of the individual striving for and having some satisfaction in a lower level of success due to not being exposed to having higher level of success.
The participants’ commitment to school shows they value education and the opportunity that education brings just like others. Their commitment is shown in the challenges they faced and the adversity they overcame to graduate from high school, to obtain a high school diploma. They believed a high school diploma would lead to a better life and they continue in encouraging their children, brothers and sisters in this belief by being examples of achievement. However, their diplomas did not lead to career and economic success, which are the dominant standards for success. According to the Vega model for the study of social policy, the dominant narrative is what is used to measure success, which reflects the public’s beliefs opinions, and attitudes, and which perpetuate the original cultural values, norms, and standards of the dominant narratives. The participants found their own form of success in their individual satisfaction of being successful in high school and in later life.

Implications and Recommendations

Implications and Recommendations for K-12 Schools

This research among others is both useful, as it has contributed understanding and strategies for making schools more effective for African American males. Because of the overwhelming amount of negative research written on African American males who have not graduated from high school, the author encourages further research on African American males who have graduated from high school and are working in their perspective communities and contributing positively to society.

These findings have implications for educators K-12 for interventions to increase the graduation rates of African American males, who are struggling to graduate from high school and become positive influences in their communities. As noted in chapter 2,
through documentation, analysis, and interpretation of the education of African American males in our public schools, sociologists have come to understand how education has come to be a state of perplexity for African American males. Motivating students to become academic successful is part of educators, and administrators roles. For example, to invest in and examine the finding on becoming culturally sensitive as Antonio state when talking about one of his teachers: “He was more urbanized. You would think he grew up in a black home.” Antonio’s teacher invested into understanding his students of color culture, thereby, becoming culturally competent of his student environments to help better educate them. Culture has always been a contributing factor in the education of American citizens.

Kincheloe (1993) talked about cultural capital and how the dominant culture values its own notion of cultural capital. The idea that the dominant culture notion of cultural capital rewards students who possess those skills and punishes those who lack those skills further gives insight into understanding of the school success and lack of school success of African American males. Ladson-Billings viewed cultural capital from critical race theory (CRT) as:

Not to be naïve about the way capital can be deployed as a way to create hierarchy and inequity, i.e., institutions of a capitalist and White supremacist society will happily allow you to have new forms of capital as long as they do not infringe on their old established ones. Most insidious they will appropriate your forms of capital and repackage them to produce their forms” (p. 117).

The devaluing of African American male culture leads to the devaluing of the African American individual— the “organism” himself. This is in accord with the
foundational work of the Kilpatrick Group, back in the 1930s at Teachers College, which suggested that devaluing the culture and devaluing the individual result in a lack of learning success, and this oversight leads to oppressive devaluation leaving African American males largely excluded from the discourse of academic success and placed them in the discourse of failure. The participants in the study however, have demonstrated their commitment to academic success, which empowered them to become academically successful. Thus, teachers and school administrators can implement strategies from this study to help other African American males to become academically successful.

Based on the findings of this research and the existing literature on school climate I recommend that schools make conscious consistent effort to help African American males feel that they matter at school. Some steps schools might take to incorporate the ideas of mattering included: (a) provided a quality education so that African American males can strive for a higher quality of life standards, (b) partnering with African American males mothers who have developed strategies to help their sons become academic successful, as the study showed that all of the participants mothers were vital in their academic success and (c) becoming culturally sensitive and knowledgeable about the community of their students.
Implications and Recommendations for the Courts

Scholarship proves how important it is to show that there are African American males who are successful in academics and life in general. By presenting evidence that African American males do graduate from high school while being beset with social conditions that require significant efforts can dispel negative stereotypes about African American males and change attitudes towards them.

As representatives of one of the most stigmatized ethnic group in the U.S., African American males sometimes find themselves in situations that subject them to experience negative social consequences. Studies have indicated that one out of three African American males born today will go to prison as opposed to college and be under the supervision of the criminal justice systems.

The findings from the research indicate that courts, which include judges, probation officers, prosecutors and attorneys and others, can utilize the finding to help African American males on probation further their education. The findings from the research can help reduce recidivism with this population, as the participants discussed current life success while on probation. As discussed in chapter 2, according to Noguera (2008), “Although they comprise a relative small portion of the American population (less than 6 percent), African American males occupy a large space within the American psyche and imagination” (p.xi). The occupation that African American males have in the psyche and imagination of Americans is of fear and suspicions. Due to this overwhelming fear and mistrust it has over shadowed the positive news that most African American males value academic achievement and that most are fathers, workers and contributors to
their communities. Thus, we have to obtain understanding of the effects of negative beliefs that have contributed to the lack of some African American men success in school and society overall. The author’s research shows that there are African American males who are successfully in academic and life in general. Overcoming challenging lifer situations, the research can dispel negative stereotypes About African American males and change attitudes toward theme. The makeup of the nation’s public school educators are 77% white females.

The majority of the probation officers at Toledo Municipal Court—in which institution the participants in this study were probationers and where I have worked for two decades—is White females as well. This study did not research the overall percentage of the ethnic and racial makeup of the nation probation officers. However, the lack of African American probation officers at Toledo Municipal Court has led to a continuing of misunderstanding of African American men. To illustrate this claim, I will return to including autoethnographic data.

*Over the years, I have often heard white female probation officers make disparaging comments regarding the educational and employment capabilities of African American men. As recently as January 2016, when I was deep into completing this study, a White female probation officer made the comment, “I’m tired of having Black men on my caseload who have not graduated from high school and that are unemployed.”*

African American men in general regardless of their professional status or academic achievement fined their character suspect. Autoethnographic data abound, but I will offer only a few examples.
As I noted in chapter 1, a co-worker of mine, a White female referred to me as a defendant as I was leaving for the day with a wool hat on.

I observed a white male probation officer laughed upon learning that one of his young African American male probationers had shot and paralyzed a 16-year-old African American male.

I am an African Americana male. Like other African Americana males I have been subjected to suspicions and hidden racism in schools, professional work settings, and various social milieus. For example, in the 11th grade, an African American male educator told me the following: “You ain’t going to be anything in life.” While that statement was hurtful, and particularly coming from a African American male educator (and obviously inaccurate), his low expectation for my success would have stunted my intellectual growth if I had not been of strong will to prove him wrong. When I obtained my Bachelors’ degree from Saginaw Valley State College, I took it to my high school and showed him. His comments were he was using reverse psychology to motivate me.

I, too, am continually insulted by the one-sided depiction of African American men. I applied for employment at one of the universities in Ohio as a campus police officer in 1985. I had moved back home from Grand Rapids, Michigan where I had been a campus police officer for two years. I was highly qualified for the position: a college degree and two years experience afforded me a final interview. During the final interview questioning, an elderly White male who was one of the five panelists made the following comment to me: “We have a lot of pretty women on this campus.” Even as a young man, I knew what his implications were regarding African American males and stereotypes of them being sexual predators (as I am not.). As tragic as this is, two years later this same
university hired a young White male in the position of campus police officer, and he stalked, shot, and killed a young White female student. I provide this account only to illustrate continuous stereotyping of African American men when they do achieve academic success and are still beset with barriers to social standing and economic opportunities.

My experience allows me to see that it is indeed impressive that the participants achieve what they do achieve in the face of a court system that is highly bigoted still.

Scholarship has shown that these are some of the same attitudes that public school teachers have towards African American men and boys. Becoming culturally competent is important for educators, it is also important for employees of court systems, particularly probation officers and human relations administrators, who are paid by taxpayers, including taxpayers of color, to work with people of color and are in positions to impact their lives.

The author is further suggesting that there is extreme urgency to extend further research on African American males on probation or under the supervision of the criminal justice systems, as the current research shows that African American men on probation do care about education.

**Implications and Recommendations for Society**

This study demonstrates that one of the more important reasons the participants choose to become and/or remain engaged academically is the notion that they contributes to their communities. Based on the findings in this study and existing literature on academically successful African American males, communities including clergies, community activists, neighborhood associations, block watch and other individuals can
help motivate other African American men to become academically successfully. The participants in this study expressed desire to contribute to their community, as when Emir stated, “I want to contribute to this world.” One of the most persistent themes from the research is the participants’ adaptation to and the utilization of resilience. The findings have implication for intervention for communities working with young African American males. Understanding resilience in this research as noted in chapter 2 becomes manifested as a reaction to society’s expectations of these African American males students social factor and they prevailed academically despite of those environmental and social factors. Williams and Portman (2014) explained, “Educational resilience is the ability of children/adolescents to succeed in schools despite exposure to personal and environmental adversities”(p. 14).

African American males are often not allowed to give voice to the designing of interventions aim at helping them to become successfully academically and socially. This research allows a group of young African American males to create change as inclusions and bring solutions to their problems from within. Difference in communities experience as noted by Stewart (2007), the ecological theory, an individual’s environment consists of several co-occurring or nested levels that interact to influences human development. Although grade point average was not a factor in deterring academic success, communities should focus more attention on average and failing African American males, as they are the ones who are over represented in the criminal justice system and struggling to achieve socially.
**Recommendations for Further Research**

Further research should continue the attempt to understanding and build on what African American males who are on probation or under the supervision of the criminal justice system consider being academically successful. This author strongly suggests that future research should heed the call for more comprehensive studies that gives positive voices to young African American males.

**Conclusion**

The voices of these participants afford a unique insight of how they see life’s success and being academically successful. People’s satisfaction are not very reliable indicators of their quality of life. Nussbaum (2001) noted:

> Wealthy and privileged people get used to a high level of luxury, and feel pain when they do not have delicacies that one think they do not need. On the other hand, deprived people adjust their sights to lower levels to aspire to, nd experience satisfaction with a reduced living standard. (p.219)

Listening to the men’s stories about their current life success, all but one were unaware of possibility of a quality of life beyond paying the electric bill. Antonio was the only one who, while saying a good quality of life is being able to “take care of your essential needs,” also said, “It’s not all that great.” That is, he defined quality of life according to his own past experience, but he also could critique that as inadequate. Considered through Nussbaum’s philosophical framework, Antonio’s observation shows that while African American males often “adjust their sights to lower levels” and “experience satisfaction with a reduced living standard,” they are aware that this is “not all that great”:  

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this could be a clue to answering the perplexity that African American men have become disenchanted with the promise of school.

They are also unaware of the policies related to this lowered standard available to them and that might have led to their incarceration.

*As a probation office, I’ve met with countless African American men who have been involved in the criminal justice system for minor offenses for which others have been simply given warnings and not arrested. Many of the charges that these young men find themselves on probation for are what the African American community calls “Black charges”: (a) resisting arrest, (b) no operator’s license, (c) obstructing official business (d) loitering, and (e) jay walking.*

These charges have been used to establish contact and arrest African Americans, particularly African American men. After arrest demographics are collected, including fingerprints and photos, this enables law enforcement to keep detailed records on African Americans. The dominant culture likes to claim that justice is colorblind and that without laws there would be no order. I argue that race is one of those concepts that is already well established before individuals have contact with law enforcement and that is why the participants in this study found themselves on probation. The research also presents evidence of counternarratives, or what I would even call “emancipating narratives,” to provide interpretive space to resolve dissonance between the participants’ present social and cultural realities and their chosen strategy for fulfilling future aspirations.
References


House, E. (1990). An ethics of qualitative research. Qualitative field studies. 159-165


Appendix A

ADULT RESEARCH SUBJECT - INFORMED CONSENT FORM

_African American Males’ Ideas about School Success: A Research Study_

**Principal Investigator:** Lynne Hamer, Ph.D., Professor, EDFL, 419-530-7749  
Anthony Bouyer, M.A., LICDC, EDFL, 419-472-1155

**Purpose:** You are invited to participate in the research project entitled, _African American Males’ Ideas about School Success_, which is being conducted at the University of Toledo under the direction of Lynne Hamer and Anthony Bouyer. The purpose of this study is to develop a clear understanding of how African American males navigate through high school and beyond, including what they consider as academic success.

**Description of Procedures:** This research study will take place in Toledo, Ohio, and will consist of one or two interviews of approximately one hour each. You will be asked questions such as what motivated you to complete high school. The interview will be audio recorded in order to make sure your ideas are understood entirely by the researchers.

“Permission to record: Will you permit the researcher to audio record during this research procedure?

YES ☐ NO ☐

Initial Here

After you have completed your participation, the research team will debrief you about the data, theory and research area under study and answer any questions you may have about the research.

**Potential Risks:** There are minimal risks to participation in this study, including loss of confidentiality. In order to protect confidentiality, all data will be kept using pseudonyms for participants rather than participants’ real names if participants prefer not to use their real names. The use of pseudonyms communicates to others that your privacy as an individual independent of the research should be respected. If you feel upset or anxious, or do not want to continue participating for any reason, you may stop at any time.

**Potential Benefits:** The only direct benefit to you if you participate in this research may be that your participation will help other African American males graduate high school, will help other African American males achieve academic success as well. Others may
benefit by learning about the results of this research. Including educators, mental health
counseling, probation officers, parents and community leaders will benefit from the
research to help African American males achieve academic success.

**Confidentiality:** The researchers will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on
the research team from knowing that you provided this information, or what that
information is. The consent forms with signatures will be kept separate from responses,
which will not include names and which will be presented to others only when combined
with other responses. Although we will make every effort to protect your confidentiality,
there is a low risk that this might be breached.

**Voluntary Participation:** Your refusal to participate in this study will involve no penalty
or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled and will not affect your
relationship with Toledo Municipal Court or your conditions of probation. In addition,
you may discontinue participation at any time without any penalty or loss of benefits.

**Contact Information:** Before you decide to accept this invitation to take part in this
study, you may ask any questions that you might have. If you have any questions at any
time before, during or after your participation you should contact a member of the
research team, Anthony L. Bouyer, 419-245-1969, Dr. Lynne Hamer, 419-530-7749.

If you have questions beyond those answered by the research team or your rights as a
research subject or research-related injuries, the Chairperson of the SBE Institutional
Review Board may be contacted through the Office of Research on the main campus at
(419) 530-2844.

Before you sign this form, please ask any questions on any aspect of this study that is
unclear to you. You may take as much time as necessary to think it over.

**SIGNATURE SECTION – Please read carefully**

You are making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your
signature indicates that you have read the information provided above, you have had all
your questions answered, and you have decided to take part in this research.
The date you sign this document to enroll in this study, that is, today’s date must fall
between the dates indicated at the bottom of the page.

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Appendix B

African American Males’ Ideas about School Success: A Pilot Study

The following items on the interview protocol represent various reasons why African American young men were able to graduate high school.

Introduction:

As you know, I want to talk with you about graduating high school because there are more African American males (53%) who do not graduate from high school as opposed to those who do graduate from high school (47%). Since you represent that 47%, I’m interested in the major factors that motivated you and helped you to graduate from high school when probably most of your classmates did not.

Section One: Graduation

1. I’d like you to tell me the factors that you attributed to your academic success. How would you describe them. What were your thoughts on education that were important to you at that time?

2. I’m going to ask you about the defining moment in your schooling which could have impacted your academic decision either way to graduate high school or drop out. When did that defining moment occur, what grade level did this moment occur? Can you describe that whole episode, what was you thinking, feeling and who was involved?

Section Two: Academic Experience

1. I’d like you to discuss your teachers and others during you academic experience including the following:
   * Tell me the grade level
   * Subject matter
   * Gender and race

2. Now I’d like to talk to you about issues relating to having a high school diploma. People say that graduating high school and earning that high school diploma is extremely important. I am sure you have probably heard that you needed a high
school diploma, but are there really benefits to having a diploma from high school?

3. Now I would like you to say, from your experience, what are your thoughts about obtaining a high school diploma?

4. What have been satisfactions or dissatisfactions as a black male of graduating from high school, of having the diploma?

5. Do you think the results of getting a high school diploma are the same for you as an African American male as for others? Can you tell me similarities and differences?

Section Three: Thoughts on the quality of life.

1. I’d like you to tell me about what do you consider as a good life.

2. Now I’d like you to discuss your thoughts on having a high school diploma and the quality of life.

3. I would like to now talk about academic success, as many individuals define academic success in different ways. How do you define academic success?

4. I’d like you to discuss your thoughts and feelings regarding education and what explains why you were able to graduate high school and so many black males do not?

5. Now I’d like to talk with you about family, including your brothers and sisters, friends, neighbors and others in your community. I’m mostly interested in your perception of these individuals and how much of influence did they have on your desire to graduate high school and what was that influence from each sub group?

Section Four: Demographic Information

1. Do your parents have a high school diploma?
   - Father YES______NO______
   - Mother YES _____No______

2. What is your age? ______________

3. When you were growing up, what was family’s economic situation?
   - Stable housing __________Approximately how often did you move?
   - Enough food and good nutrition?
• Was there enough money for school clothes?
• Was there enough money for school supplies and extracurricular activities?

4. Please list names of all schools you attended:
   • Elementary Schools:
   • Middle Schools:
   • High Schools:
   • Any College experience?

Section Five: Family Background

1. When did you family migrate to Toledo?

2. What were the reasons for your family to migrate to Toledo?