

DEFYING THE ODDS: STORIES FROM THE  
PERSPECTIVES OF SUCCESSFUL  
AFRICAN AMERICANS

By

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Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Graduate College of the  
Oklahoma State University  
in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for  
the Degree of  
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION  
May, 2018

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AFRICAN AMERICANS

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## DEDICATION

If I have seen further it is only by standing on the shoulders of giants. ~Sir Issac Newton

**Educators.** This dissertation is dedicated to all the giants in my life. I thank my principals, teachers and coaches who invested in me holistically regardless of my race, and because of my race. I thank you for seeing my potential, then watering and nurturing the seeds of academia, leadership, confidence, passion, and care for others. You exemplified scaffolding at its best: saw light in me, considered my circumstances, maintained high expectations, taught me to overcome the excuses and hurdles that impeded my path to greatness. Thank you for being difference makers in my life. Because of you, I chose educating children as my life's work.

**Elders.** I dedicate this study to the significant elders in my life. My late grandmother Katie Holt, who was forced to drop out of school during her primary years to pick cotton and taught to read through the usage of the Bible; therefore, never able to achieve formal educational milestones. My late grandmother Sunny Blanchard, who graduated valedictorian from high school and tutored me through tough courses in high school and college. You both were a wealth of wisdom in my secular and spiritual education. I was fortunate to have you both in my life over forty years and to also positively impact the lives of my children. My Grandpa Jesse Blanchard, who gave me the gift of gab, writing, articulation and the ability to find a song to sing regardless of my circumstances. You have been a true patriarch in the Blanchard Family!

**Parents.** My parents Stanley and Cheryl Blanchard who taught me to look beyond my front door and to value education, I thank you. You were the consistent faces in the crowd, cheering me on in success and achievement and the embracing arms comforting me through disappointment and loss. I pray I have made you proud.

**Principal.** The great Jerry Rickerts, my high school principal and friend. Your uncanny ability to build meaningful relationships taught me to be an affective administrator. Your impression upon my life has created a ripple effect and lives on in the lives of thousands of students, teachers, parents, and communities.

**Participants.** I also dedicate this dissertation to the outstanding African American men and women who participated in this study. I admire each of you for living your personal definition of success as you purposefully impact the lives of others. Thank you for allowing me to tell your profound stories of success in the face of adversity.

Dedications and Acknowledgements reflect the views of the author and are not endorsed by committee members or Oklahoma State University.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my husband Londaryl Perry, my strong band around our house, for providing unwavering support for me throughout this journey. You make me better and I'm so glad that God paired us as partners in this life. To my children, my heart, my legacy, Drake and Dru Perry, you inspire me. Thank you for your patience and sacrifice. You've had to share me with so many other young people your entire lives. My love is multiplied, but my time has been divided, and you deserve all of me.

To my Grandpa Jesse, who called me Dr. Perry years before I began this arduous path; you've always held me accountable to finish what I start. Thank you for instilling character in me, skipping the A's on my K-12 report cards and focusing on the most important categories: Character, Citizenship and Attendance. You showed me early on that E's and S's were more important than the A's.

To my parents, Stanley and Cheryl Blanchard who never let me settle for less than my best, I thank you. I appreciate you both pushing me to a level of frustration in order to get the most out of me. You didn't make me fearless, but your confidence in me helped me FEAR LESS and take risks.

I acknowledge with heartfelt thanks: my Soul Sistas, friends, family, colleagues, sorority sisters, and mentors who have encouraged, supported, and uplifted me throughout my studies. All of you have contributed more than you can ever know to my understanding of myself as a scholar, an educator, and as an African American woman.

Dr. Curry and committee members, thank you for valuing this study and using your influence to motivate me to complete this work without excuses. You demonstrated your knowledge of me and triggered exactly what I needed to, Get It Done!

And finally, I extend my hands up towards Heaven to give "The Great I Am" all of the glory, honor and praise! Lord, you have proven yourself to me time and time again. You walked with me through the doctoral program and on several occasions, you carried me. Thank you for ordering my steps in your word.

All of you are the amalgamation of the success now known as Dr. Shana Perry!

Name: SHANA M. PERRY

Date of Degree: MAY, 2018

Title of Study: DEFYING THE ODDS: STORIES FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF  
SUCCESSFUL AFRICAN AMERICANS

Major Field: SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION

Abstract: The purpose of this qualitative case study is to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of six successful African Americans who achieved success despite growing up in high poverty situations in an effort to gain a more encompassing, realistic, and intimate understanding of how and why they were able to overcome dismal circumstances associated with poverty. These individuals attained academic learning, success, and achievement after graduating from a Midwestern state's low socioeconomic urban public high school, completed a bachelor's degree, a master's degree when required, and finally a doctorate, resulting in a better quality of life. The desire is to gain a deeper, richer, more insightful understanding of the factors which led to their academic success. Nora's Student Engagement Model (2002, 2003, 2006) will serve as a lens to view the themes of the African Americans who experienced academic success in the face of the odds stacked against them. Nora's Student Engagement Model (2002, 2003, 2006) was selected as the lens to view this research because it includes the factors that influence student retention prior to enrolling and attending college. The intent of the model is to identify specific latent constructs that have an impact on the decision of undergraduate students to drop out of college or to persist and remain in college. Findings revealed numerous commonalities, but the emergent themes were shared through the sub-questions that provided a better structure to share the findings. Narrative language amplified the voices of the participants that would have otherwise remained silent (Glesne, 1999). Finally, the researcher provides implications for theory, practice and suggests recommendations for additional research to add to the existing body of knowledge. Overall, the African American outliers in this study demonstrated Frankl's (1992) point that, "human potential at its best" can "transform personal tragedy into a triumph" and "turn one's predicament into a human achievement." (p.116)

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

As a fifth grader, I was required to memorize the Preamble to the Constitution of the United States of America, and I remember having a discussion with my dad about the meaning. That is when he introduced me to a great orator, Congresswoman Barbara Jordan. Her words echo in my mind today, “‘We, the people.’ It is a very eloquent beginning. But when that document was completed, on the seventeenth of September in 1787, I was not included in that ‘We, the people’” (Jordan, 1974).

The American dream of a better life, inclusive of the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, is supposed to be guaranteed to all Americans; instead, it evades many minorities. According to the Anti-Defamation League (ADL, 2017) after analysis of 97,000 American schools, the United States Department of Education found numerous patterns of inequality with race and poverty as the divisive factors. High schools with the high density of African Americans revealed the following: fewer college preparation courses, more likely to have first year teachers and teachers who do not meet all the certification requirements, and underrepresentation in Gifted and Talented Education Programs and over representation in discipline and suspensions. To effectively communicate the severity of the problem, the ADL (2017) presented profound findings representing a snapshot of the academic achievement access gap and opportunity

gap with a visual representation titled, Still Segregated: Still Unequal Opportunity Gap (Appendix A). Further, a report from Education Trust (2014) emphasizes that, even when young African American students begin school with a strong start, high achieving African Americans, regardless of income, and other high achievers from low-income families graduated with lower GPAs, posted lower college entrance exam scores, and had lower passage rates on rigorous Advanced Placement exams than their White peers (Bomberg & Theokas, 2014).

The Educational Longitudinal Study of 2014 serves as recent nationally representative data regarding high achieving students exhibiting signs of risk. The findings suggested that these students experienced lower levels of instructional quality and support from teachers and administrators (Harmon, 2002; Bomberg & Theokas, 2014; Maitre, 2014). It is commonly understood that the essence of success in life evolves from the academic success experienced in the school-setting (Glasser, 2000). Educational attainment is one of the most essential indicators of lifelong economic opportunities. Higher educational attainment is closely associated with improved socioeconomic status, higher wage rates, and even better health (Rothstein, 2004).

The story of the Black-White achievement gap has been told many times before. Society is knowledgeable of the staggering statistics among minority populations: higher infant mortality rates, a lack of or limited access to health care, single-parent homes, and decreased access to early childhood learning programs (Rothstein, 2004). At almost every juncture, the odds are heavily stacked against African Americans in ways that result in too much unfulfilled potential and too many fragmented lives (Gabriel, 2010). For example, the ADL (2017) presented information concerning the School to Prison Pipeline that many African American males experience (Appendix A). This report identifies the negative

experiences that many African American children often endure in school regarding discipline consequences issued. Specifically, while African American children make up only 18% of preschool children, they represent 48% of all preschool children receiving more than one out of school suspension. In contrast, White students are representative of 43% of preschool children, but they account for only 26% of all preschool children receiving more than one out of school suspension (ADL, 2017). African American students account for three times the suspensions and expulsions compared to their White counterparts. Another startling statistic emphasizes school-related arrest. African Americans represent 16% of total school enrollment, but they represent 31% of students arrested at school (ADL, 2017). Comparatively, White students represent 51% of the total school enrollment, but account for only 39% of those arrested at school (ADL, 2017). An infographic titled, School to Prison Pipeline, found in Appendix A, catches the attention of the audience and causes interest. This report and representative infographic image, like the cover of a book, creates a desire to investigate the topic and continue reading.

Despite an emphasis on civil rights in America during the past 60 years, school achievement for many young African American boys and girls remains in a state of crisis. Many African American young people often do not have equality in educational opportunities and resources as their White male and female counterparts across the country. According to the analysis of how African American males and females are performing academically on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and college entrance exams, the academic achievement gap is more discouraging than originally known (Gabriel, 2010; Hanushek, 2016). In 2015, the NAEP combined proficiency rate reported a 29.2% Black-White achievement gap with 45.1% of Whites and 15.9% of African Americans

reaching the minimum standard of proficiency. Additionally, despite a comparison from 2003-2015 demonstrating both groups increasing, the gap remains the same. In 2003, NAEP reported African Americans had a combined proficiency rate of 10.3%, and Whites combined rate of proficiency was 39.0% (NCES, 2015; Bohrnstedt et al., 2015). Since the 1950s, acts of legislation, research, and funding have all attempted to create equality in American schools; a common goal of these efforts focused on barriers to the success of African American students and sought to close the achievement gap between African American students and their White counterparts, but the gap persists (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2004).

Alas, *Harlem* by Langston Hughes first written in 1951, often referred to as “Dream Deferred” still applies today.

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore—And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over—like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags like a heavy load.

Or does it explode? (The Estate of Langston Hughes, 1994)

The passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002) and the subsequent reporting of the disaggregated achievement data by every school district in the United States helped to expose the consistent achievement gap experienced by African-American students. Data gathered in response to the legislation required states to disaggregate student test scores by race, gender, socio-economic status, and students with disabilities instead of reporting data as whole school percentage passing each content area

assessed. This report revealed a persistent trend regarding the pervasive achievement gap present in student learning, success, and achievement in public schools (Hoxby, 2005). NCLB refers to different groups within the American student school population as “subgroups” (NCLB, 2001). Although the legislation was enacted in 2002, over 15 years ago, even high performing school districts were unable to meet the standard set forth for their subgroups to demonstrate a level of proficiency on the state assessments. NCLB required the states and school districts to reach Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) (NCLB, 2001). This expectation was applicable to disaggregated test scores for each identified subgroup. Yearly, each subgroup was required to meet proficiency standards in the high stakes content areas of reading and mathematics; the level of proficiency required determined by the state increased in an effort to reach the proficiency level on both reading and mathematics tests by the 2013-2014 school year. Often, analysis of NCLB data exposed that one of the sub-groups not achieving AYP continued to be African American students (Hoxby, 2005). Compared to White students, a large number of African American students disproportionately underachieved in public schools in the United States (Thernstrom, 2004). Discontent with results of NCLB regarding minority groups led many legislators and civil rights groups to demand a replacement for NCLB. The resulting legislation, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), maintains a requirement for school accountability based on disaggregated student achievement data by ethnic subgroups.

The issues which emerge from the statistics and review of the literature are both moral and economic in nature. With so many African American citizens lacking access to the fruits of the richest nation on earth, the aspirations as a truly just nation where the American dream is tangible are called into question. Our democratic ideals are challenged with the fact

that children's academic achievement can so clearly be predicted by race and family economic status (Rothstein, 2004, 2014; White, 1982). No policy, program, or initiative has resulted in a consistent widespread reduction in the educational achievement gap between Black and White students (Rothstein, 2014; ADL, 2017).

### **A Promising Trend**

Although progress for many African American students has been slow, research indicates that more African Americans are graduating from high schools, and attaining college degrees than ever before even though their academic performance continues to lag behind that of White students (Rothstein, 2014). According to Kao and Thompson (2003), there are signs of optimism as the educational achievement and attainment gaps have narrowed over several decades by every measure available to social scientists. However, significant gaps remain, especially between African Americans and Whites (Rothstein, 2014). The ability of the greatest nation in the world to maintain success and leadership is jeopardized by having so much talent and academic potential go to waste (Lewis et al., 2010). Thus, additional empirical research is necessary to respond to this critical problem which persists in American education.

The failure to educate all children to the highest level leaves many students across America ill-equipped to be true competitors in the world-wide global competition (Auguste, et al., 2009). The racial and ethnic hierarchy in educational achievement is apparent across varying measures of the academic experience (Kao & Thompson, 2003). These differences result in associated negative implications for the futures (Lewis et al., 2010; Rothstein, 2014) of minority children and future generations. McKinsey & Company's (2009) research shows that American schools have not lived up to the promise "no child left behind;" in reality, the

American educational system continues to allow whole groups of children to lag behind. Academic shortfalls in academic achievement of African Americans have imposed heavy and often devastating consequences such as lower earnings, poorer health, and higher rates of incarceration (Rothstein, 2014).

Additional contemporary literature documents the presence of continuing barriers to the academic success of African American students (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2004; Rothsetin, 2004, 2014). Even African American students identified as high achievers and performing at or near the top of their class fall behind their high achieving White counterparts by the time they complete high school (Maitre, 2014).

### **The Problem**

Compared to White students, a large number of African American students disproportionately underachieve in American schools (Thernstrom, 2002). The Black-White achievement gap has persisted over time and across economic lines and has remained despite various national educational reform measures (Taylor, 2007; Rothstein, 2014, ADL, 2017). Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka (1954), the Coleman Report (1966), NCLB (2002), and ESSA (2014) have been attempts to close the achievement gap, but instead of closing it, the policies and reporting processes of the data emphasizes the gaping Black-White achievement gap (ADL, 2017). On every academic measuring tool, African Americans continuously score at the bottom and are ranked last compared to all other subgroups. Research also indicates that coming from a middle-class family doesn't protect African American students from the Black-White achievement gap (Wiltz, 2012).

Regardless of these realities, an anomaly exists in that there are pockets of African American individuals who have overcome barriers that are often associated with and

experienced in high-poverty, urban environments to graduate from urban public high schools and continue onward to gain professional success, some even earning a doctoral degree (JBHE, 2017: NSF, 2017). These African American “outliers” have experienced learning, success, and achievement even though they attended high school in high-poverty, urban environments where many of their peers did not experience the same success. What is not known is how these students overcame barriers to educational success. It is possible that these individuals have experienced the needed support and those factors within their environments that encouraged their engagement in school. Therefore, it is plausible that Nora’s (2002, 2003, 2006) Model of Student Engagement may be useful in explaining the intervening significance of culture and ethnicity to the retentions and persistence of African American outliers.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of six successful African Americans who achieved success despite growing up in high poverty situations in an effort to gain a more encompassing, realistic, and intimate understanding of how and why they were able to overcome dismal circumstances associated with poverty. These individuals attained academic learning, success, and achievement after graduating from a Midwestern state’s low socioeconomic urban public high school, completing a bachelor’s degree, a master’s degree when required, and finally a doctorate, resulting in a better quality of life. The desire is to gain a deeper, richer, more insightful understanding of the factors which led to their academic success.

Much of the previous research that has focused on why some African American students succeed while others fail has relied on observation, testing, and surveys of the

school culture, teachers, parents, students, principals and the classroom environment (Bailey, 1997; Kuykendall, 1996; Lewis, 2008; Lewis et al.; 2010). This present study takes a different approach, examining, on a personal level, the perceptions of selected African American outliers identified through purposeful sampling. This qualitative case study will rely on an in-depth depiction of factors that have influenced their success by using qualitative methods designed to capture the participant's perceptions of factors and experiences that have influenced their educational attainment from the inception of their public schooling (K-12) through the completion of an advanced professional degree. The African American outliers in this study are those few whose academic achievements fall outside African American norms (Gladwell, 2008). These extraordinary African American achievers not only fall into the small percentage of those scoring proficient, but they surpass proficiency levels and are achieving success at the highest academic peak.

### **Research Questions**

The following questions serve as a focus to guide this research study.

Primary Research Question:

What factors or experiences do these selected African American participants, who have completed a doctoral program, report as influencing their educational success?

Sub-questions:

1. What personal qualities/attributes can be identified as contributing to their success?
2. What K-12 experiences/critical incidents have contributed to their success?
3. How did relationships contribute to the success of these individuals?

## **Theoretical Framework**

The use of a theoretical framework provides a researcher with “order, clarification, and direction” to guide the inquiry (Harris, 2006, p. 145). Theory identification and selection was determined prior to conducting the study and therefore provides a lens, or framework, through which to view the data collected (Creswell, 2009).

This study will draw from Nora’s (2002, 2003, 2006) Model of Student Engagement Theory for college student retention. Student persistence to graduation or an advanced degree is a central issue for all populations, but especially those subpopulations more likely to experience distal risk associated with race and poverty. Nora’s (2002) Model of Student Engagement was originally applied to Hispanic American students. Much of the research and reports on the Black-White achievement gap includes Hispanic Americans; when discussing the achievement gap, access gap, opportunity gap, and neighborhood gap, Hispanics were mentioned as another identified group lagging behind (Wiltz, 2012).

Nora’s Student Engagement Model proposes six major components (2002, 2003, 2006),

- precollege/pull factors
- sense of purpose and institutional allegiance
- academic and social experiences
- cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes
- goal determination/institutional allegiance
- persistence

Each component is interrelated and influences student persistence through the college experience. Nora’s Model considers the psychological and behavioral factors experienced in

high school and identifies specific latent constructs which impact college persistence. The model hypothesizes that encouragement by parents and significant others helps the student make a successful transition and adjustment to college (Nora, Barlow & Crisp, 2006).

### **Research Design**

A qualitative case study research design will be used for this study. A case study design was selected to gain a deeper insight and understanding of factors that have influenced the success of these successful African Americans (Creswell, 2009). Stake (2000) argued that a case study is not so much a methodical choice, but a choice of what is to be studied. Yin (1994) defined a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident...[and] relies on multiple sources of evidence” (p. 13). The experience of educational success, earning a doctoral degree, is the case to be investigated and the sources will include six African Americans. Purposeful sampling will be used to recruit African American individuals from one high-poverty urban district in the Midwest who have graduated and subsequently earned a doctoral degree. Following purposeful sampling, six participants will be selected for this study. The researcher will conduct interviews with each of the participants, and additional data will be gathered through observations of participants in their natural environments. The researcher will also analyze documents, artifacts, and journals kept by the participants during the course of the study. Each interview and data obtained will be coded and analyzed to identify themes that emerge (Creswell, 2009).

## **Significance of the Study**

This study intends to help educators gain a more advanced understanding of educational environments that are conducive to academic success for urban African American students. The investigation of the factors that have promoted the success of African Americans in high-poverty, high-risk situations can inform educational leaders and policy makers as they seek purposeful steps to enhance success opportunities for marginalized individuals. Focusing on the significant gains of these African Americans will help stakeholders and policy makers understand factors that can, potentially, lead to success. This approach provides new insight because it stands in stark contrast to previous attempts to understand many factors that individuals face, such as poverty and lack of resources, that they have little or no control over. The present study is significant because much can be learned from those who have overcome barriers and achieved academic greatness. The successful individuals in this study will be those who have gained access to something that seems to elude many young African American males and females across the country: a quality American education resulting in a doctorate degree.

## **Definition of Terms**

*Academic resilience.* Academic resilience is an interactive and systemic phenomenon, the product of a complex relationship of inner strengths and outer help throughout a person's life span (Butler, 1997, p.26). In simpler terms, academic resilience can be seen as the "in-spite of" response to risk factors that normally result in low academic performance (Cappella & Weinstein, 2001).

*African American.* For the purpose of this study, the term African American refers to an American of African and especially of black African descent and not an immigrant.

An American who considers himself Black or African American when it is related to recorded data on applications, U.S. Census, and even for the purpose of this study.

*Distal risk.* Distal risk is risk based on membership in disadvantaged groups, such as low socioeconomic status (SES), minority status, single-parent households, and emotional and physical abuse (Bernard, 2004; Cappella & Weinstein, 2001; Rak & Patterson, 1996). For the purpose of this study it will focus on African Americans who lived in poverty and attended and graduated from an urban, low socio-economic school. Other factors may be shared during the study.

*Educational success.* Educational success for the purpose of this study is the academic attainment of a doctoral degree.

*Intervention.* An intervention is a program or initiative put in place by an educational institution for the purposive and deliberate intention of enhancing student performance.

*Outlier.* Outliers are people whose achievements fall outside normal experiences and follow a peculiar and unexpected logic, and in uncovering that logic, present a proactive blueprint for making the most of human potential (Gladwell, 2008).

*Socio-economic status (SES).* The socio-economic status is the identification of a grouping of individuals based on family financial earnings; specifically for the purpose of this study family income calculated will be based on qualifying for free and/or reduced lunch. This is also how American schools determine the percentage of students with a low SES and considered economically disadvantaged. For this study, low socio-economic status will be determined by qualifying for free or reduced lunch (FRL).

*Subgroups.* In the disaggregation of test scores, an identified group of students separated

from the student body as a whole is known as a subgroup. The subgroups identified in NCLB include: economically disadvantaged, special education, limited English proficient, and students from major racial/ethnic groups. The subsequent ESSA added additional subgroups of students, such as students in foster care (2015).

*Teacher efficacy.* The concept of self-efficacy was pioneered by Alberta Bandura who characterized self-efficacy as the extent to which individuals believe they can organize and execute actions necessary to bring about a desired outcome. Self-efficacy is fundamentally concerned with the execution of control rather than the outcome produced (Bandura, 1977). In 1984, Patricia Ashton published a groundbreaking study that fundamentally expanded the concept of efficacy to include the extent to which teachers feel confident they are capable of bringing about learning outcomes.

*White flight.* The relocation of Whites from urban areas to outlying areas or suburbs in order to avoid living among Black and Hispanic residents (Carruthers, 2002; Massey & Denton, 1993).

### **Limitations**

Limitations are potential weaknesses the researcher identifies within the study (Creswell, 2012) that can influence results or findings of the study. According to Creswell (2012), “These weaknesses are enumerated one by one, and they often relate to inadequate measures of variables, loss or lack of participants, small sample sizes, errors in measurement, and other factors typically related to data collection and analysis” (p. 199). The current qualitative case study of African Americans graduating from a Midwestern State urban, low socioeconomic high school, living in poverty and going on to earn a bachelor’s, master’s, and

doctoral degree included limitations. Because this study is a qualitative case study, results from this study cannot be generalized. However, while this study is not intended to generalize the manifestations of African Americans who successfully navigate barriers to their success, this study can provide a unique insight into factors that led to the success of these individuals. In keeping with the tradition of qualitative inquiry, I recognize I am the data collection instrument in this study (Merriam, 1998). Believing that all data is filtered through the lens of the researcher, and that data is influenced by one's race, class, gender, and social experiences, I acknowledge my subjectivity regarding the experiences of African-Americans who qualify as a sample participant. As an African American female growing up in a high poverty environment, I graduated from college with a bachelor's degree to become a schoolteacher. Subsequently, I then completed my master's degree and became a public school administrator, spending the majority of my career in urban low-socioeconomic schools. I am keenly aware of the biases I bring to this study in regards to the barriers faced by the participants. Because my perspective could bias the results of the study, I will listen intently to the voices of participants so that their voices are the ones that are represented in findings. Beyond bias, I will give ethical consideration to mitigate the impact of researcher interference during the collection of data. Although my previous experiences limit my ability to be a neutral investigator, I understand the value of having no theory to prove or any predetermined results to support. I have a commitment to discover and understand the factors that led to the success of these African Americans. I intend to discover associated success factors from the perspective of these successful African Americans who have experienced academic achievement at the highest level.

## Summary

Although the achievement gap between Black and White students is bleak, concentrating on factors that lead to success can bring new perspectives. For example, the psychologist and concentration camp survivor Viktor Frankl (1992), so eloquently painted a picture by writing, "...uniquely human potential at its best, which is to transform personal tragedy into a triumph, to turn one's predicament into a human achievement." (p. 116). While the academic achievement gap is disturbingly large, there are numerous African Americans successfully completing their educational pursuits in the face of current negative statistics (Gabriel, 2010). Therefore, it is necessary that research is focused on which success factors contributed to African American students' academic learning and achievement.

Chapter I provided an introduction to the Black-White achievement gap and the rippling effect it has had on the lives of generations of African Americans. The past and present policies and unsuccessful attempts to remedy the achievement gap and how the gap is reported were shared. Chapter I also discussed that the majority of research publications document the shortcomings of African Americans; therefore, there is a need to establish more positive empirical research investigating how and why certain African American outliers have been successful. The researcher justified the significance of the study focusing on the subgroup of African Americans raised in poverty, graduating from an urban low socioeconomic high school and going on to earn a terminal degree, doctoral degree. The research questions serve as a focus to the present study. The wording of the research questions was intended to set the stage for a qualitative case study filled with rich-thick detailed descriptions (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The significance of the study goes on to provide pointed statistical information to support the need for such a study.

Chapter II provides an overview of the literature involving the African American achievement gap that continues to persist and the history of segregation and inequality, the standards and assessments that provide a detailed data picture of the continued gap, and the conclusion peaks with a numeric representation of the African American high achievers who have defied the odds. The literature review is followed by a description of Nora's (2003) Student Engagement Model.

Chapter III is an overview of the research methodology used in this study. The population, sample, data collection techniques, and method of analysis are discussed in Chapter III.

Chapter IV presents the case of the six successful African American participants from this qualitative case study detailing the narrative data collected.

Chapter V is a discussion of the findings of common and divergent themes that emerged while answering the primary and sub-research questions through narrative data analysis.

Chapter VI presents the theoretical framework while utilizing Nora's (2006) Theory of Student Engagement as the lens to interpret the individual factors and experiences African Americans believe influenced their educational success. The final chapter also includes implications for theory, practice and suggests recommendations for additional research to add to the existing body of knowledge.

## CHAPTER II

### CRITICAL INFORMATION OVERVIEW

#### **The Nature and Scope of the Black-White Academic Achievement Gap**

A persistent educational achievement gap between Blacks and Whites is recorded in history (Coleman et al., 1966, Ratner, 2008). The problem has continuously persisted from the founding of the nation, through the time of slavery, reconstruction, the Civil Rights Movement, and remains ever present today. Initially, the acknowledgement of the achievement gap was publicized after the unveiling of the Coleman Report in 1966 (Viadaro, 2006). The 1964 Civil Rights Act, passed in the wake of President Kennedy's assassination after years of being filibustered in the U.S. Senate, mandated a public report be prepared and presented to both the President and Congress "concerning the lack of availability of equal educational opportunities for individuals by reason of race" (Coleman et al., 1966, p.3). The Coleman Report, a landmark document, spanning more than 700 pages, became the first nationwide, comprehensive survey report that documented the different achievement levels and educational conditions of Black and White students in the United States (Coleman, et al.).

## **What is the Achievement Gap? How is it Measured?**

The academic achievement gap refers to the differences in academic achievement of minority students identified as African American or Black as compared to White students, particularly in the areas of reading and math. The Office of Educational Statistics, a related, yet independent extension of the Department of Education, computes and measures the gap on a national scale in what is called the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP); this report is synonymously called, “The Nation’s Report Card” (Bourque, 2009, p. 26).

The NAEP categorizes students into four ability levels: Advanced, Proficient, Basic, and Below Basic. The tests are regularly measured at 4<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> grades. A student who has the academic knowledge and skills necessary to perform at grade level in a specific content area will receive a rating of “Proficient.” A rating of “Basic” represents partial mastery of what the student should know at that grade, and “Below Basic” is representative of the student who lacks even rudimentary academic knowledge, skill, and ability necessary for the grade level (Loomis & Bourque, 2001a, 2001b).

The essential goal of NCLB is for all children to become academically proficient. The data from NAEP clearly shows a large-scale gap between White students and Black students who score “Proficient.” In fact, the concentrations of African American students who score “Below Basic” represent serious learning deficiencies between races (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015, 2015).

### **Scope of the Gap**

Relative to the amount of attention focused on Black-White gaps in mean academic achievement, African Americans’ underrepresentation among the highest

scoring students and overrepresentation among the lowest-scoring has become a footnote to the Black-White mean gap. However, if the gaps in mean test scores are disturbing, the gaps in representation at either end of the test score distribution are overwhelming (Bourque, 2009). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2015), at all levels of achievement in reading and mathematics, a significant gap exists between White and Black students regardless of family income. The staggering results of students eligible for the federally funded free or reduced lunch program are evidenced by race and level of proficiency. For example, test results from the NAEP (see Figure 1) shows that in 2015, only about 17% of 4<sup>th</sup> grade African American students were proficient in reading or advanced, versus 35% of White 4<sup>th</sup> grade students, yielding a 18% gap.

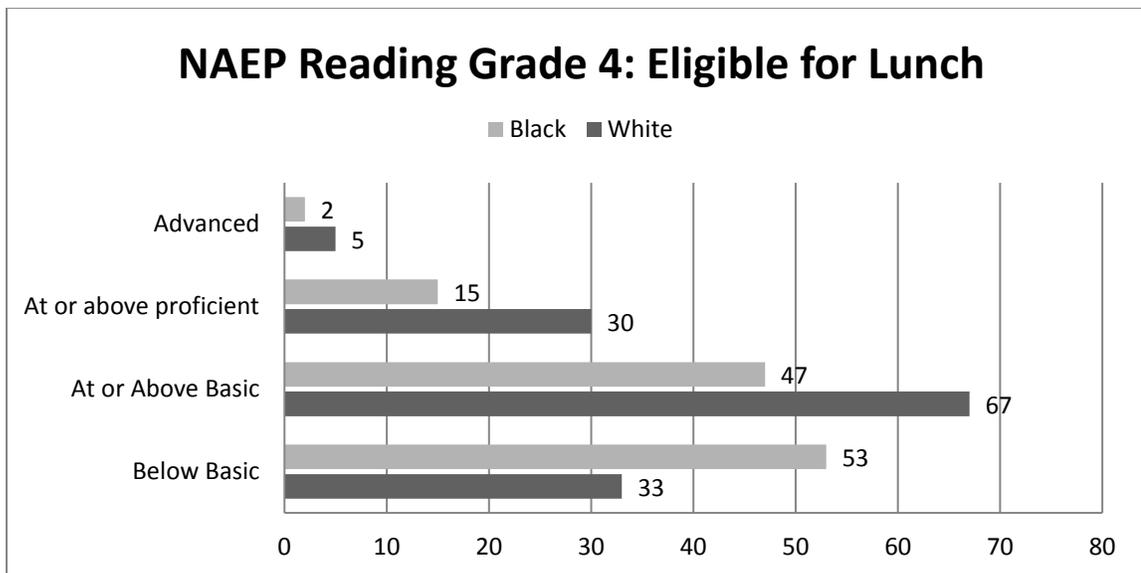


Figure 1. The Nation’s Report Card: Percentage distribution in reading achievement levels of White and Black students in 4<sup>th</sup> grade. Source: National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015.

Similar results are revealed in 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading results for students eligible for the federally funded free or reduced lunch. The gap between Black and White 8<sup>th</sup> grade test-takers remains evident (see Figure 2). Only 12% of Black students scored “Proficient” while 29% of White students reached this level of academic success and 2% scored at the

advanced level. The gap persists with 17% difference between the two subgroups (NCES, 2015).

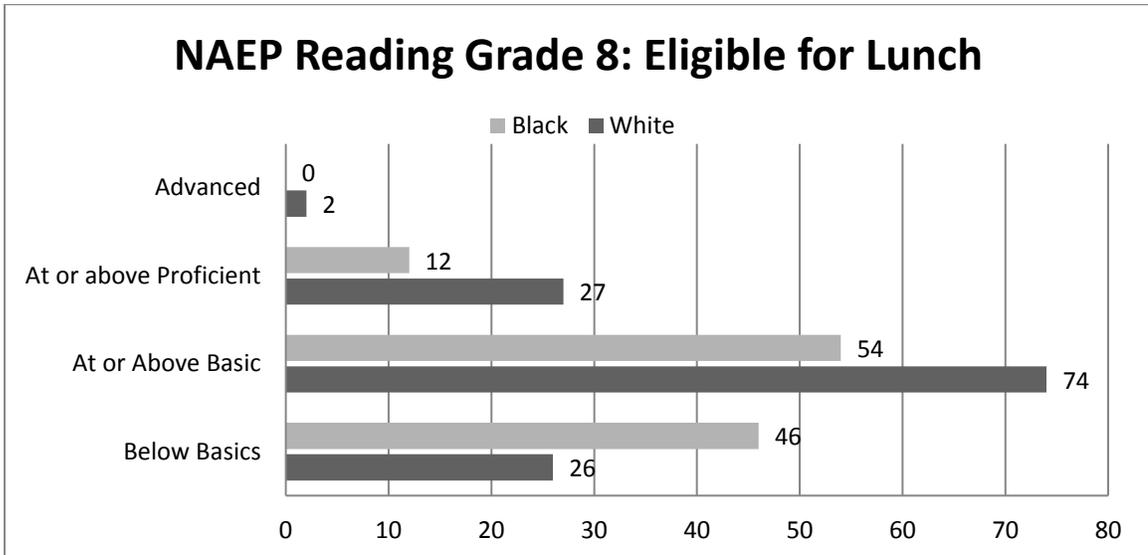


Figure 2. The Nation's Report Card: Percentage distribution in reading achievement levels of White and Black students in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Source: National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015.

Achievement levels in mathematics also show an across the board gap between White and Black students at both 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade levels. Figure 3 shows 16% of Black 4<sup>th</sup> grade students scored proficient or higher versus 36% of White fourth graders. The gap in 4<sup>th</sup> grade math scores is 20% (NCES, 2015).

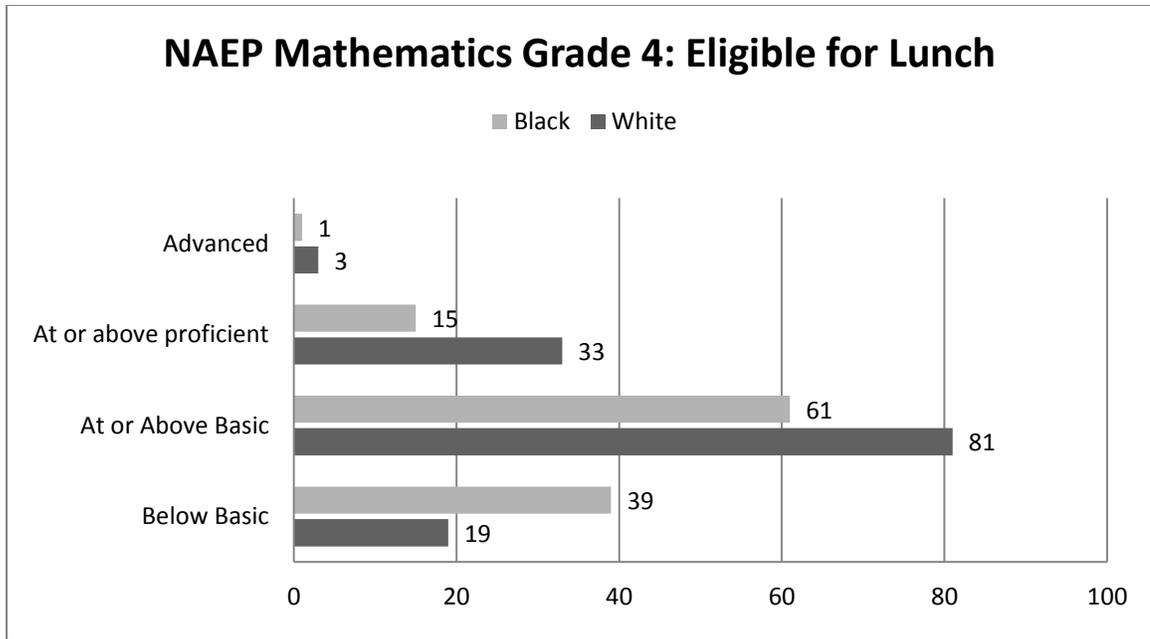


Figure 3. The Nation's Report Card: Percentage distribution in math achievement levels of White and Black students in 4<sup>th</sup> grade. Source: National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015.

Figure 4 shows only 10% of Black 8<sup>th</sup> grade students qualifying for the federally funded lunch program scored proficient or advanced versus 27% of White fourth graders. The gap in 4<sup>th</sup> grade math scores is 17% (NCES, 2015).

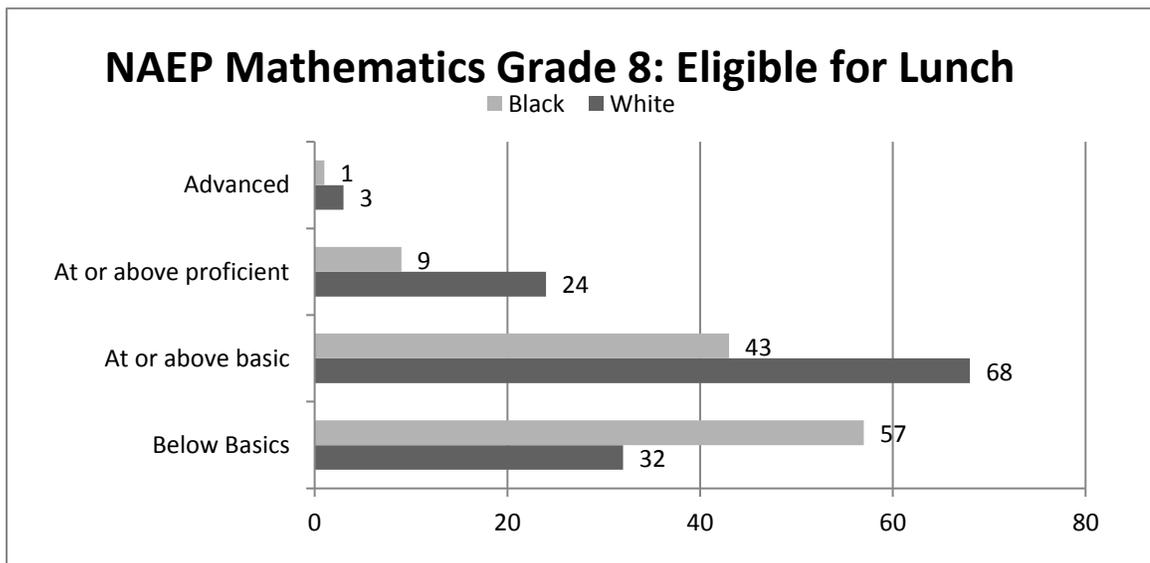


Figure 4. The Nation's Report Card: Percentage distribution in mathematics achievement levels of White and Black students in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Source: National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015.

The scope of the gap is similar in the academic tested areas when students do not qualify for the federally funded free and reduced lunch program. This subgroup would include students from families identified as lower middle class and above including affluent families. The next four figures will include the same data points as the previous four figures, but they will focus on the students on the disproportionate achievement gap in the below basic category. There is also a significant disparity in the below basic level. Where Black students are underrepresented at the proficiency level and above, they are overrepresented at the below basic level; approximately 48% of Black 4<sup>th</sup> graders scored in the below basic range in reading and 21% of White students scored in the same range (NCES, 2015). This finding indicates a 27% gap.

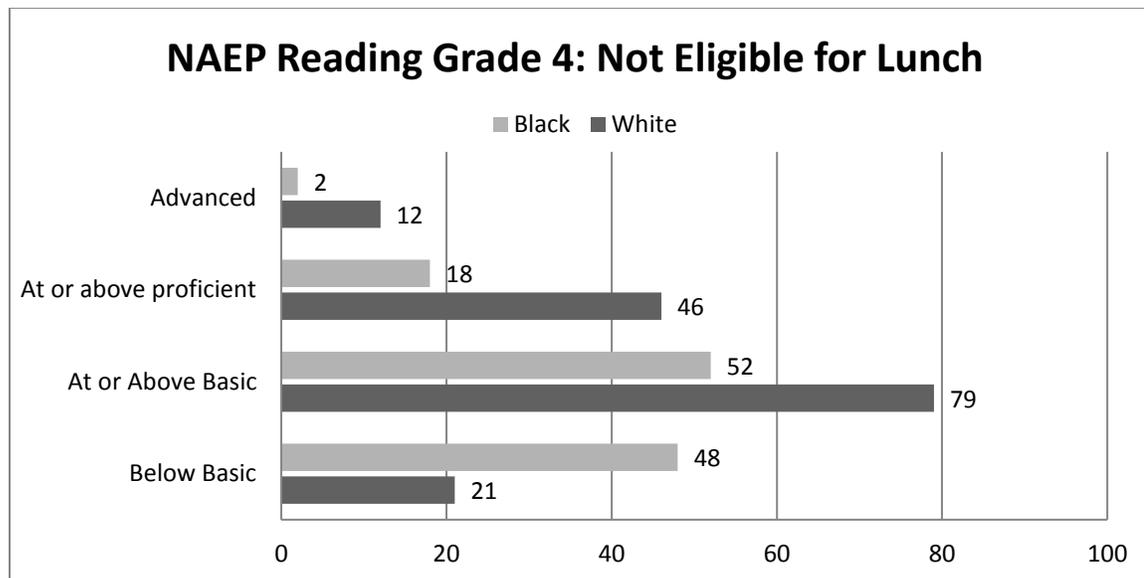


Figure 5. The Nation’s Report Card: Percentage distribution in reading achievement levels of White and Black students in 4<sup>th</sup> grade. Source: National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015.

Again in 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading the gap persists with a 27% gap at the below basic level; 42% of Black students scored below basic and only 15% of White students were represented in the lowest identified achievement category (NCES, 2015).

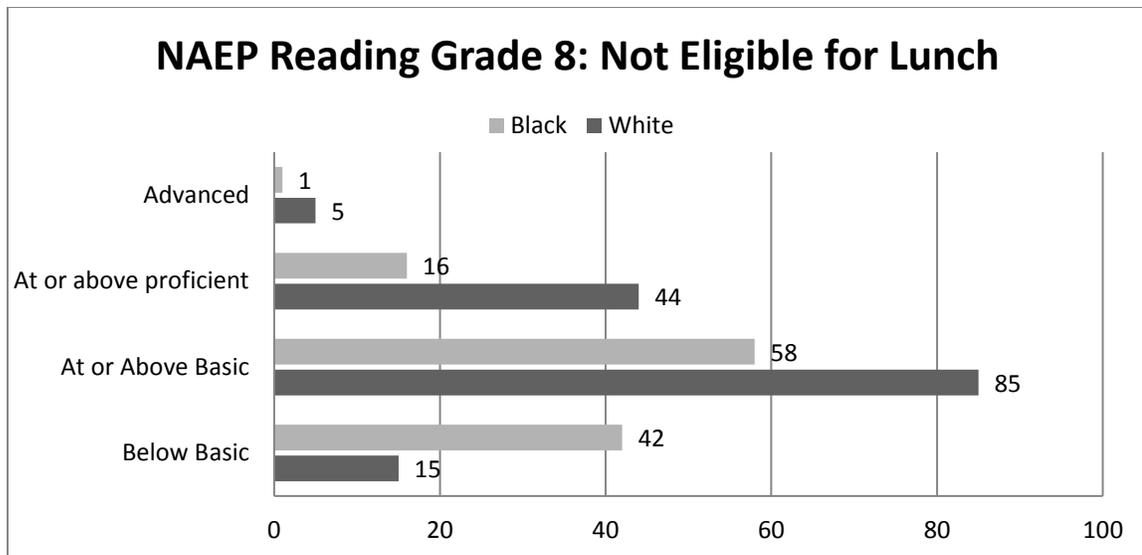


Figure 6. The Nation’s Report Card: Percentage distribution in reading achievement levels of White and Black students in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Source: National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015.

The achievement gap increases in the area of mathematics in both 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade for students not eligible for the federally funded lunch program. These results provide data that caused the researcher to investigate more about why the underachievement even in middle class and affluence persists. This investigation into the literature resulted in the discovery of the neighborhood gap and the negative factors associated with middle class Blacks student being exposed to the similar circumstances as impoverished Black students (Rothstein, 2014). The neighborhood gap will be discussed more in depth later in Chapter II. In 4<sup>th</sup> grade mathematics, the gap increases to 26% in the below basic achievement category. Only 7% of White students and 33% of Black students scored below basic (NCES, 2015).

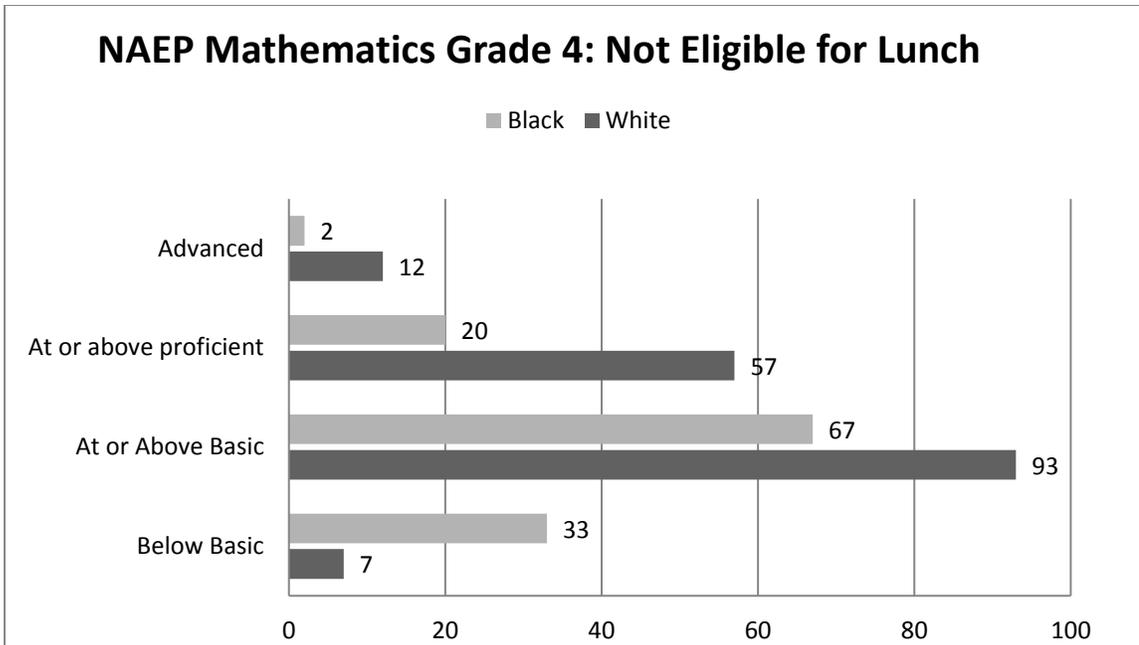


Figure 7. The Nation's Report Card: Percentage distribution in mathematics achievement levels of White and Black students in 4<sup>th</sup> grade. Source: National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015.

NAEP mathematics scores in 8<sup>th</sup> grade increase again in the below basic area.

Unfortunately, 52% of Black students scored below basic, and 18% of White students (see Figure 8). The gap is now 34% (NCES, 2015).

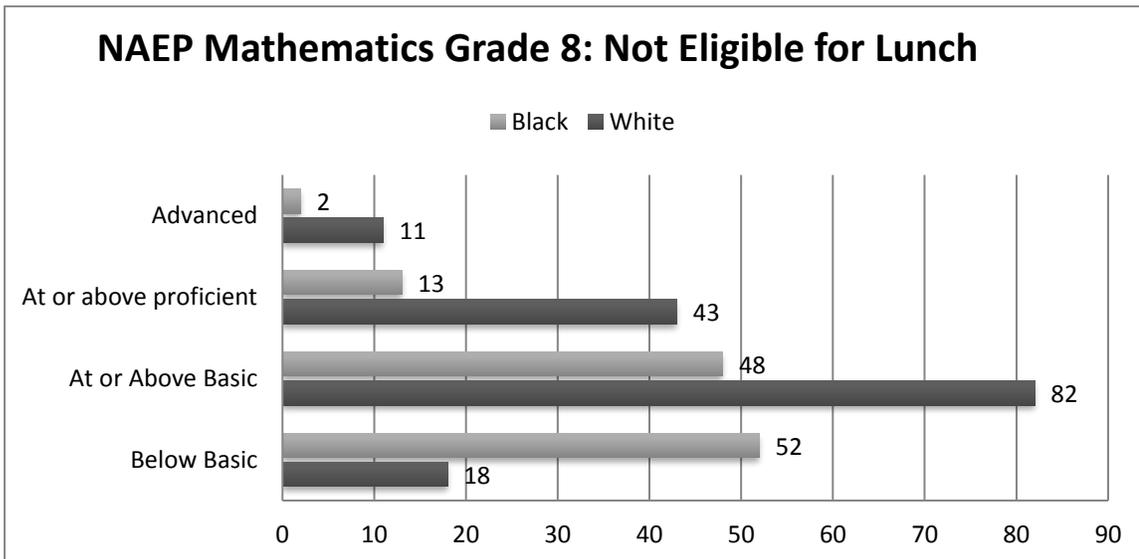


Figure 8. The Nation's Report Card: Percentage distribution in mathematics achievement levels of White and Black students in 4<sup>th</sup> grade. Source: National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015.

The ACT entrance exam is often used as a college preparation, success, and completion indicator used by many colleges and universities across the U.S. The scope of the gap on the ACT is also important to this study. The additional figures compare the 2015 composite scores of Black and White students nationally (see Figure 9), and the composite score of Black and White students in the Midwestern state where the participants in this study attended high school (see Figure 10. ACT disaggregates scores based on “Core or More” (ACT, 2015). Core results correspond to students taking four or more years of English and three or more years of math, social studies, and natural science (ACT, 2015).

The achievement gap between Black and White students is prolonged. The gap begins with the students taking “Core or More,” with 8% more White students taking the necessary college readiness courses prior to taking the ACT. Additionally, the composite scores have a consistent gap of between four and five points nationally. The gap is between three and four points at the state level. Black students taking “Core or More” have a lower ACT composite than White students taking less than Core at both the national and state level (ACT, 2015).

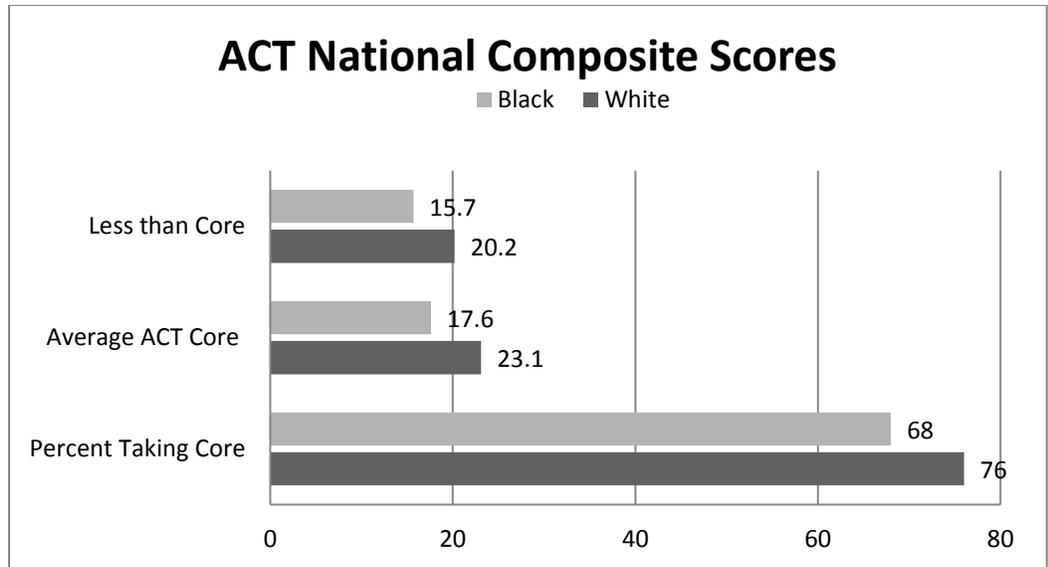


Figure 9. National Composite ACT Score Averages and Percentage of students taking Core, based on students tested in 2015.

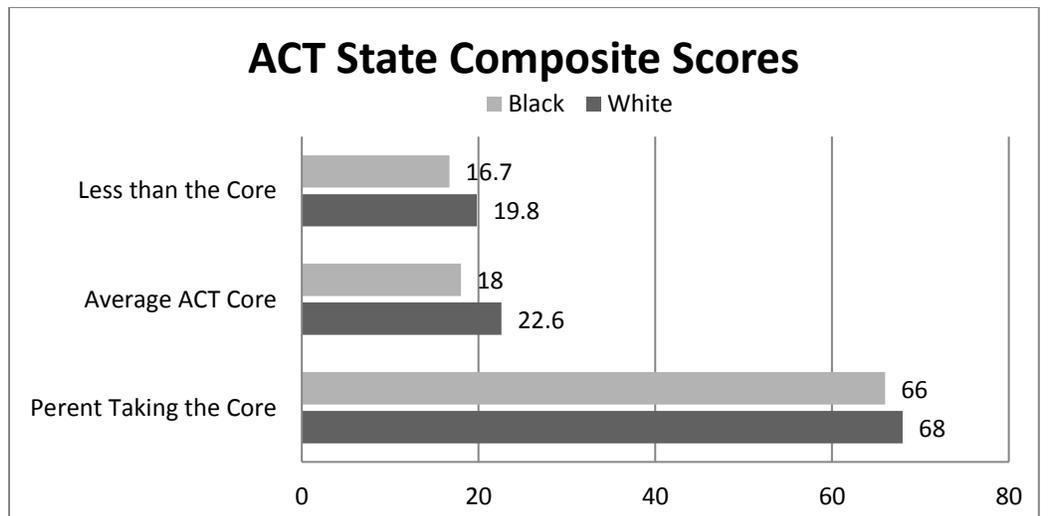


Figure 10. Midwestern State’s Composite ACT Score Averages and Percentage of students taking Core, based on students tested in 2015.

The ACT College Readiness Benchmarks indicate readiness for credit-bearing first-year college coursework in English, reading, mathematics, and science. The following chart (see Figure 11) shows how ACT-Test high school graduates’ college readiness in English varies with family income and race/ethnicity (ACT, 2011). The chart provides a look at the four major races compared including: Asian, White, Hispanic and African American. This graph also identifies the percentage of students from each of the

three income brackets (see Figure 11). The percentages of students meeting benchmark, near benchmark and test-takers scoring greater than or equal to three points below the benchmark. Again, the achievement gap is gaping in every income category (ACT, 2011). This figure is inclusive of the four races identified to demonstrate that Black students score below every other race in every income bracket.

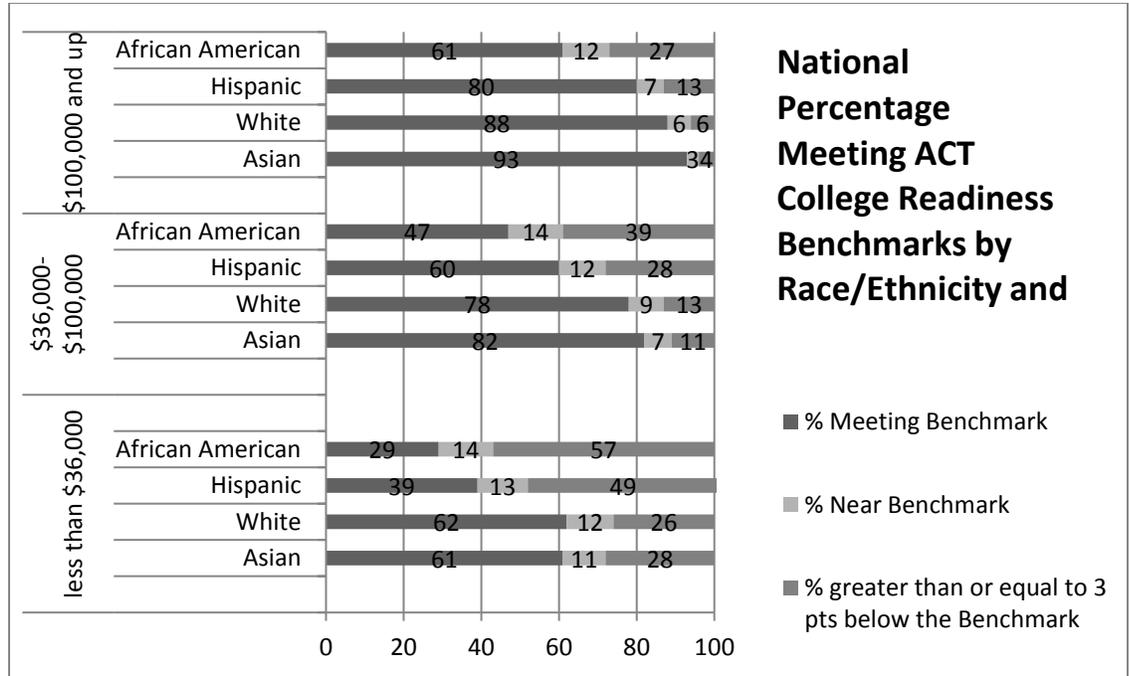


Figure 11. National Percentage Meeting ACT Benchmarks by Race/Ethnicity and Income

The results are consistent and the scope of the gap is important to this inquiry. It provides evidence of a persistent gap in NAEP and ACT scores regardless of income.

### Family Demographics

The most prominent explanations for Black-White achievement gaps reference inequality in access to resources that, when present or available, have positive effects on students' educational outcomes (Rothstein, 2014). For example, the presence of two parents in the household increases parents' abilities to form strong relationships with their children; relationships, then, facilitate the transmission of financial and cultural resources

from parents to children (Coleman, 1988). Researchers have estimated that these differences in families account for somewhere between one-third (Hedges & Nowell, 1998; Hernstein & Murray, 1994) and two-thirds of academic achievement gaps between White and African American students (Phillips, et al., 1998), depending on the way the resources are measured.

### **History of the Black-White Achievement Gap**

Often times, in order to understand the present, it is imperative to look back and evaluate the past. The same is true for the Black-White achievement gap. It is necessary to look through historical reflective spectacles at the Black-White achievement gap. There were many laws and public policies that legally impacted the education of African Americans.

The history of white European-descended colonists importing, trading, and owning enslaved Africans are a significant and well-known portion of American history. Although slavery diminished in the northern states, there is an abundance of documentation supporting the exponential growth of slavery in the southern states, and it persisted until the conclusion of the Civil War (Williams, 2005)). Slaves were no more than property to their masters; they had no right to an education. The slave owner had power and authority to permit or deny a slave the privilege to learn to read (Williams, 2005).

Ratner (2008) argued that today's Black-White achievement gap was "seeded in slavery" (p.1). Beginning around 1828, many states in the South, had begun to pass laws that forbade the teaching of reading and writing to slaves and freed blacks. Primarily, the laws were a reaction to a number of high-profile slave insurrections, such as the Nat

Turner revolt, and also a reaction to published works encouraging insurrections, such as David Walker's *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (Walker, 1830). The lawmakers and supporters of the law thought uneducated slaves and freed blacks were less likely to be able to communicate and organize insurrections and revolts if they lacked an education and, ultimately, made them more manageable (Williams, 2005). Thus, slaves were widely denied even rudimentary education during that period of time.

### **Creation of the Common School**

Before Horace Mann, Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education, wrote about a system of common schools (Lasch, 1995), American elementary and secondary schools were institutions reserved for the elite. These institutions were funded primarily through personal wealth. After Mann argued extensively for common schools, a school system began to form during the 1830s and 1840s that was attended by children of all classes, not only those of the privileged few and wealthy property owners. As a result of his desire for equality among the opportunities available to American citizens, Mann was able to persuade Americans to pay for the school system as well (Lasch, 1995).

According to Lasch (1995), Mann deplored extremes of wealth and poverty. For example, Mann argued against the “European theory” of social organization, as Mann called it, and upheld the “Massachusetts theory” which stressed “equality of condition” and “human welfare” (Cubberley, (1920) p. 598). As a result of Mann’s efforts, Americans developed an educational structure that was designed to improve equality and human welfare for all students. Mann was also able to advance compulsory school attendance, separation of church and state, hiring of women, professional development, and abolishment of child labor (Lasch, 1995).

According to Lasch (1995), Mann used a “variety of arguments” to appeal to Americans that the model of education brought from Europe should not be the template for Massachusetts education. The European model caused severe highs and lows among the social conditions of its citizens, and Mann believed that this one of the very reasons that caused Americans to leave Europe (Lasch, 1995; Mann, 1848).

These common schools paved a path for freed Black slaves to be formally educated. Near the end of the American Civil War in 1865, when former slaves began to receive the chance to attend school in the South, a system separate from the common schools was created to cope with the growing needs of newly freed Black slaves (Cruden, 1969).

### **Reconstruction: Post Slavery**

During the Reconstruction period after the Civil War, Southern Blacks and many Northerners used their newfound political influence first to build schools and then to establish free and universal public education (Tyack & Lowe, 1996). At the end of the Civil War, northern aid societies and the United States government's Freedmen's Bureau, created by the Radical Republicans in Congress, offered money and support to create schools (Track & Lowe, 1996). However, most of the schools in the South were actually created by Blacks themselves (Foner, 1990; Track & Lowe, 1996). Young children, also considered school age children, as well as adults and elderly people attended these one-room schools. The schools became the focal point of the communities. This ability to get an education was the essence of the definition of “freedom” for Black people during this era (Foner, 1990).

A system separate from the common schools was created to cope with the growing needs of newly freed Black slaves. To accommodate the influx of newly freed slaves into the American society, Congress established the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands in March 1865 (Cruden, 1969). Also known as the Freedmen's Bureau, this organization mandated social welfare programs, including the creation of the first formal schools for southern Blacks during Reconstruction (Cruden, 1969). Although some funding was provided by the U.S. Congress through the Freedman's Bureau (Cruden, 1969), it was inferior and inequitable to education funding for White students.

The Freedmen's Bureau provided social services, food, medical care, and resettlement services to Blacks, and, in 1866, as education became available to more Black people through religious organizations and other assistance organizations, it provided order and funding to establish their school system (Cruden, 1969). W. E. B. Du Bois called this organization "one of the most singular and interesting attempts to grapple with the vast problems of race and social condition" (Colby, 1985, p. 1). This organization was also responsible for the development of other assistance programs, such as rations distribution, health care, and a judicial system (Cruden, 1969). However, the Freedmen's Bureau did not have enough support in Congress to continue its role of working with the poor, and in June 1872, its commissioner was transferred to assist in peace negotiations with the Apache Indians, and the agency was discontinued (Colby, 1985). Since the Freedmen's Bureau was founded during a time when segregation was the prevailing social philosophy, it helped frame a social structure of inequality well before American society implemented the Jim Crow laws (Colby, 1985).

Although common schools had opened for Blacks in the southern states, many also failed due to education funding shortages and violence toward Black schools and their teachers (Cruden, 1969). Few public schools in either the North or the South were racially integrated during the 1870s. Although boys and girls might be allowed to attend class together, there was resistance to Black and White students in the same class. The typical White American in that time period viewed the mixing of races within the schools with as much grace as mixing healthy children with those infected with smallpox (McAfee, 1998). In a few northern states, education for Blacks began receiving money from public funds as early as the 1850s, but these institutions were intentionally segregated from the common schools for Whites.

Evidence suggests that there was a lack of concern for the negative impact that segregating the schools would have on Black children (Cruden, 1969). After the Illinois constitutional convention in 1870 created adoptions to the state constitution that provided education to all children, the Illinois superintendent of public instruction from 1864 to 1874, Newton Bateman, advised Blacks not to be aroused about segregation (Cruden, 1969). The superintendent warned that the obvious economic burden of maintaining separate school systems would cause the cost of education to rise, creating an economic burden that would soon put an end to segregation (Cruden, 1969; Henry & Feuerstein, 1999). According to Cruden (1969), Bateman's optimism was unrealistic. Bateman acknowledged in 1874 that many local school trustees simply ignored education for Black children. The overall progress of education for Blacks was slow due to White hostility, emphasis on White education at the expense of Black education, and resistance to integration of schools (Cruden, 1969).

Edward King, a British visitor to the southern states from 1873-1874, offered a clear description of what he witnessed during his visit (Champney, 1875). Black and White children played together in the streets, but White Southerners continued to hold strong views against mixing the students within the common schools. The common schools remained a world where children of different races did not mix, and a major threat to the separation of Whites and Blacks remained neutralized (McAfee, 1998).

During Virginia's public school debates in 1875 and 1876, racial considerations were the primary focus (McAfee, 1998) White oppositionists claimed that it was a waste of money to try to improve African Americans through education since God had made them inferior and those who intended to educate them were committing blasphemy against God (McAfee, 1998). However, during this same time period, as the Freedmen's Bureau was working to develop teachers in the North, Ignatius Donnelly, who was a Republican congressman, warned that public education should not be left to the states (McAfee, 1998). He was concerned that the nation might be susceptible to the danger of "cultural dissolution" from both "uneducated Irish immigrants and illiterate freedmen" (p. 18). With his words, Donnelly voiced his agreement with a petition sent to Congress by the citizens of Medford, Massachusetts, to request that an agency be created at the federal level to promote education throughout the nation that included other races. They believed that Whites were responsible for educating and leading other races despite the differences between their cultures and social mores (McAfee, 1998).

When congressional support for Reconstruction ended in 1877, state governments quickly transformed themselves away from radical republican policies (Tyack & Lowe, 1996). The remnants of the White power structure in place during and

prior to the Civil War regained power at the various statehouses across the south (Tyack & Lowe, 1996). De Tocqueville (2000) describes three “prejudices” that would continue to exist in the modern American society even after slavery had been abolished. He believed that these prejudices---prejudice of the master, prejudice of race, and prejudice of the White---led to an unbridgeable gap separating Blacks from Whites (De Tocqueville, 2000). Post-Reconstruction state governments began to pass laws and formulate educational policy that reversed the gains made by blacks during the first few years following the end of the Civil War. This setback persisted for decades thereafter, until, and in many cases after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954, southern schools were separate and severely unequal. Huge disparities in funding exacerbated the problem as southern states on average spent only 38 cents on a black child's education for every dollar provided for a white child's education (Ratner, 2008). Early examples of the disparity in education funding between the separate schools for Blacks and Whites were seen in several former slave states. In those states, no provisions were made for the funding of education for Black children. Although there was some action to create and support education for these children, it was largely illustrative of the lack of any federal requirement during Reconstruction (Ratner, 2008).

### **The Policy of Tracking**

The methodology of teaching that began to change around the turn of the century further contributed to the achievement gap (Dickens, 1996). As public schools grew up and away from the one-room format because of increasing enrollment, separating students into curriculum tracks based on their academic ability became a popular method of educating large numbers of students. In high schools, students were placed in an

academic track for those expecting to go to college while others were placed in less challenging vocational or general tracks for those who would not be going on to college after high school. Since there was little need to have a high school degree for many jobs in the first half of the twentieth century, less than half of all students, regardless of race, finished high school (Jaynes & Williams). Even so, the achievement gap between White and Black students was profound. In 1940, 11% of black men and 14% of black women were high school graduates while approximately 40% of white men and women were graduates of high school (Jaynes & Williams, 1989). African American students were disproportionately assigned to the non-college curriculum tracks in countless school districts nationwide, typically with a less academically rigorous curriculum and lower expectations for academic achievement (Ratner, 2008; Ansolone & Biafora, 2004; Dickens, 1996).

Tracking has been associated frequently by researchers as separating students by social class and racial/ethnic compositions in schools (Dickens, 1996). Many researchers argued that the widely-used and recommended curriculum tracking policy perpetually trapped several generations of African Americans in a state of low-achieving education (Rothstein, 2004). In addition, tracking was used by perhaps 80% of school districts, after World War II and in particular, after court-ordered desegregation of schools, to keep Blacks and White students in separate classrooms (Dickens, 1996).

Multiple studies have concluded that Black students were subjected to the lower tracks while White students were more likely to be placed in the more rigorous, college bound tracks (Jaynes & Williams, 1989). Khmelkov and Hallinan (1999) found that race is an "important correlate" (p. 634) of curriculum tracking. They found that schools that

ability group students in classes end up segregating White and Black students within schools. Oakes (2005) studied twenty-five integrated schools in the 1980s and found that tracking indeed separates "whites from nonwhites" (p. 40). She further argued that the nonwhite students in the less-challenging classrooms tend to make slower academic progress and "suffer far more negative consequences of schooling" (p. 40) than their White peers.

Looking at early data from the U.S. Education Department's National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988, Braddock & Dawkins (1993) found white students enrolled in higher-level English and mathematics classes at more than twice the rate of African American students. Not surprisingly, the enrollment patterns were reversed in the lower-level classes, where African American students were signed up at more than twice the rate of white students. Furthermore, the longitudinal study showed that curriculum tracking affected the educational aspirations of students regardless of achievement level or background. Students enrolled in higher-level courses were more often planning on seeking a college education while students in lower track courses did not identify college aspirations as often (Braddock & Dawkins, 1993).

### **White Flight**

While the United States has become increasingly integrated over the last thirty years, racial segregation persists (Massey & Denton 1993). Moreover, African Americans are still the most segregated ethnic or racial minority group in the United States (Bayer, McMillan, & Rueben, 2004; El Nasser, 2011; Fletcher, 2015 Leonhardt, 2015), which means that African American students are particularly affected by segregation. The American educational system, despite past civil rights victories in the U.S. Supreme

Court and a national system of freedom and equality, continues to be segregated in modern times. Kozol (1991) wrote in the New York Times, that “segregation was still common in the public schools” and had “intensified” since the U.S. Supreme Court decided *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). In his visits to urban and suburban schools during a two-year span, he did not see any significant mixing of minority and White students within the educational environment (Kozol, 1991) He believed that modern society is more interested in complying with the directives of the court’s *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) decision and that people have accepted that our schools are segregated. The direction of school equality has changed from a philosophy of school integration to a focus on equalizing the schools in our separate communities.

In more recent events, observers were concerned in the 1970s that White flight from integrated schools could re-segregate schools as racial disparities increased (Clotfelter, 2001). According to Jonas (1998), the introduction of busing in the 1960s and 1970s triggered White flight and contributed to racial isolation and the impoverishment of urban school systems. Researchers who were examining the unintended consequences of mandated busing and desegregation on neighborhood schools found a strong relationship between Black enrollment in public schools and White flight (Renzulli & Evans, 2005citation needed). Other researchers found evidence to suggest that White flight was positively related to the minority population and the ability to find desirable residential areas with a lower proportion of minority residents (Renzulli & Evans, 2005). Lankford and Wyckoff (2000) stated that since the 1980s, concerns about racial segregation in America’s schools had been focused around either (a) fear that White parents opting for private schools will leave public schools disproportionately nonwhite

or (b) conjecture that White parents would opt to locate in largely White suburban school districts, leaving less mobile non-Whites in urban schools.

Krysan (2002) states that Crowder's specific tests of the White flight hypothesis reveals that White mobility can be predicted from changes in the proportion of Blacks in an individual tract. The data needs to be studied over a period of time because small population changes are not as apparent over one year as they are when measured over several years. The results of the researcher's analyses showed consistency in the decreases in White population and the increases in Black population from one decennial census to another between 1960 and 2000 (Krysan, 2002). Comparative data shows the percentages of the Black and White population reveal significant correlations within every city included in this study, indicating that there was a connection between the in-migration of Blacks and out-migration of Whites (Krysan, 2002). White flight is not the focus of this study, but these data do show that Whites moved away from the cities as Blacks were arriving.

Segregation has deleterious effects on African American academic achievement in three primary ways. First, the concentration of African Americans in certain residential areas, particularly in urban areas, subjects many African Americans to the challenges of living in areas of concentrated poverty (Massey & Denton 1993; Wilson, 1978, 1996; Fletcher, 2015). Living in such neighborhoods limits children's access to adult supervision networks, positive adult role models, and access to educational opportunities (Wilson, 1996; Leonhardt, 2015).

One of the results of the segregation between Whites and minorities was that the educational institutions were unequal among their communities. According to Bell

(2004), in schools that had predominantly poorer minority children, the “quality of education is shockingly bad” (p. 129); school facilities are in bad shape and the teaching staff and administration are mostly White. Rebell (1998) discusses the way in which American public schools were financed had an obvious negative effect on poor school districts and poor children. From the inception of this inequitable system in the 1800s, it prevented poor school districts from providing adequate resources to their students. Local control of schools appeared to be the “root cause” of this problem.

### **Desegregation: Success or Failure**

Sixty years after the Brown decision, the landmark case is sometimes viewed in hindsight, a qualified victory. Racially homogenous schools remain a fact in America. According to The Civil Rights Project at UCLA, “Over six decades following the court decision determining that segregation of White and Black children was unconstitutional, American schools are drifting back toward racial segregation” (2012). Throughout America, schools are re-segregated, 53 percent of African American students attending school in a district released from desegregation orders between 1990 and 2011 reported less than 1 percent of their classmates as White according to an analysis by ProPublica (2012).

The meaning of the ongoing re-segregation of our public schools becomes clearer if we look back at the campaign to integrate schools, which was concerned more with resources and less with race (Cobb, 2013). The images of resistance to desegregation with riots in opposition of busing, protests, and even death were obstacles to reach equality. “Separate is not equal” (1954) was hidden by the hostile race relations. Public schools faced enormous challenges during the late 1970s as educators were charged with

the responsibility to facilitate racial integration amid a society that remained segregated in their neighborhoods, social institutions, religious venues, and often employment (Wells et al., 2005). Desegregation although well intended had numerous negative implications to the Black community; socially, economically, and educationally (Cobb, 2013).

During segregation Black people were forced to start and support businesses in their own communities. Often, many of these businesses were thriving and helped make Black communities, such as Greenwood in Tulsa, Oklahoma, were wealthier than their White neighboring communities (Gates, 2003). After segregation ended, African Americans began to support businesses owned by White businesses causing the closing of several black owned businesses. Today, African American people spend 95 percent of their income at White-owned businesses (Cobb, 2013).

According to the Urban Institute, the state of the African American family is worse today than it was in the 1960s, before President Johnson passed the Civil Rights Act (Acs et al., 2013). Integration negatively impacted the African American family structure (Cobb, 2013). Black women married at higher rates than white women between 1890 to 1950, despite a shortage of Black males due to a higher mortality rate (Ruggles et al., 2010). In 1965, less than 10 percent of African American childbirths occurred out of wedlock compared to 41 percent in 2010; today the percentage of out-of-wedlock childbirths in the African American community is over 70 percent (Ruggles et al., 2010).

Researchers argue that marital instability caused by the African American man's socioeconomic standing, and the size of the earning difference between men and women (Ross & Sawhill, 1975). The Civil Rights Act focused on affirmative action for women

and not on maintaining African American male employment and created a welfare system encouraging removal of the Black male from the home (Ross & Sawhill, 1975). The unemployment rate of Black men quadrupled from 4 percent in 1954, to 16.7 percent in 2010 (Acs et al., 2013; Ruggles et al., 2010). Many Black men were dislodged from their families and thrust into the rapidly expanding prison industry that developed as an unintended consequence of unemployment (Ross & Sawhill, 1975).

African Americans made up 79 percent of the workforce in 1954. By 2011, that number had decreased to 57 percent. The African American median household income is about 64 percent that of Whites, while the African American median wealth is about 16 percent that of Whites (Acs, et al., 2013; Ruggles et al., 2010).

While *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) famously boasted that “separate is not equal,” racial and socioeconomic segregation continues to plague America’s public school system. African American students still go to overwhelmingly homogenous “black” schools, long after segregation was banished by law, but unfortunately they do so for so many of the same reasons prior to *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954). Six decades after *Brown*, the notion of segregation as a discrete phenomenon, an evil that could be turned on to off like a switch by a judicial edict, demonstrated the naïve policy makers and proponents of desegregation (Cobb, 2014). The initial push and results of desegregation were positive. The homogenous schools have made desegregation a pressing concern numerous decades later (Cobb, 2014). In the absence of a federal initiative, many American schools remain highly segregated (Quinlan, 2015; Rothstein, 2014). Two White graduates from the Class of 1980, included in a study of desegregated high schools participated in interviews in an executive summary 50 years after *Brown*

were quoted. The first interviewee expressed the value of his integrated high school, “I’ve never had as diverse a daily experience.” He then added, “It’s amazing to me that...my parents went through segregation. I went through integration, and potentially my daughter might go back to segregation (Wells et al., 2005, p. 7).”

The other, White graduate from the integrated Class of 1980 summed up his perspective on desegregation based on his experiences, “School desegregation was important, but not sufficient. The movement for a more integrated society needed to be taken to the next level. It would have had to be...a national priority (Wells et al., 2005, p. 7).”

### **Implications of the Neighborhood Gap**

Although Wilson (1978, 1996) sees segregation as the problem primarily of lower-class African Americans, middle-class African American families also are affected by the realities of segregation. Middle-class Black neighborhoods are much more likely than middle-class White neighborhoods to be contiguous to poor neighborhoods (Massey & Denton 1993; Pattillo-McCoy 1999), which means that middle-class African Americans are more likely than are middle-class Whites to find themselves exposed to the social disorganization and crime that characterizes poor neighborhoods. Research does suggest that average neighborhood income has a positive effect on test scores (Lopez-Turley, 2003; Rothstein, 2014).

Alas, even the most successful African Americans are more likely to have poor neighbors than Whites, according to Census data (Rothstein, 2014). Average affluent African Americans earning more than \$75,000 a year, live in a poorer neighborhoods than the average lower-income White household making less than \$40,000 a year (El

Nasser, 2011; Rothstein, 2014). According to John Logan, director of US2010 Project at Brown University (2014), the astounding statistics translate to separate remains unequal even for the most successful African Americans. After analyzing 2005-2009 data for the nation's 384 metropolitan areas, Logan (2014) concluded that African Americans remain segregated, even if they are affluent and have experienced success. They also have neighbors who have not succeeded to the same level (El Nasser, 2011). Therefore, affluent African Americans are more exposed to poverty than even the average White. Additionally, African Americans at every income level live in poorer neighborhoods than their White counterparts with comparable annual household incomes.

Stanford researchers highlighted the neighborhood gap as being an additional cause of the Black-White achievement gap (El Nasser, 2011). The continued segregated neighborhoods results in neighborhood poverty that is linked to lower-quality schools, health care, and to higher crime rates. The typical middle-class African American family lives in a neighborhood with lower incomes than the typical low-income White family (El Nasser, 2011). The continued lack of access to high achieving schools, daycare options, parks, playgrounds, transportation, workout facilities or other neighborhood amenities that would be comparable to those available to White families evades even the affluent African Americans causing continuous exposure to the same challenges poor African Americans face (El Nasser, 2011; Leonhardt, 2015). Research suggests the neighborhood effects are even helping to widen racial disparities, including disparities in upward mobility and affluence (Leonhardt, 2015).

The research shows that neighborhoods enormously impact a child's life chances and play a large role in the nation's inequalities (Fletcher, 2015). African American

families often live in poorer neighborhoods, and many people oversimplify the problem, concluding that the reason is that African American families are poorer (Fletcher, 2015). If that were all there was to it, more poor Whites would be living in the same kind of poor neighborhoods as poor African Americans. Reardon (2011) warns, growing up in poor neighborhoods exposes children to bad influences and puts them at greater risk of not going to college, earning less in their careers, and being single parents. Looking at the evidence of the importance of neighborhoods influencing future success or failure, society has to worry about the long-term consequences of these patterns of racial and economic segregation (Fletcher, 2015).

While America is becoming increasingly racially and ethnically diverse, the nation's inner cities are more segregated today than they were 50 years ago (U.S. Census, 2000). The Fair Housing Act of 1968 outlawed discrimination in the rental and sale of housing on the basis of race, religion and national origin. During the intervening years there was substantial progress toward desegregating housing patterns in the United States. Despite the advances, most urban communities in the Northern and Midwest regions of the United States, neighborhoods have been resistant to change (Quinlan, 2015). In the nation's inner cities, racial minorities, particularly African Americans, continue to reside in extreme racial isolation (Rothstein, 2014). The continuing patterns of residential segregation are not the product of choices made by individuals nor are they entirely attributable to the economic resources of individual families (Fletcher, 2015). Studies conducted by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development demonstrate conclusively that racially identifiable housing patterns are the result of decades of official segregation and the persistence of unlawful discriminatory practices (Smyth, 2017).

One of the areas where the effects of segregated housing are manifested is in the racial composition of public schools. Most students in the United States attend schools located in their own communities. Residential segregation means that school racial segregation is also high. Although active support of school integration at the federal level had all but ceased by the 1970s, school segregation continued to decrease throughout the 1980s, reaching a historic low at the end of that decade (Orfield, 2001). Research suggests that this period of integration contributed to increases in African American student test scores throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Crain & Mahard, 1978; Grissmer et al., 1998). However, school segregation has increased since the 1990s, reversing many of the gains in integration initiative and policies that occurred after the Civil Rights Movement (Orfield, 2001).

Social and economic disadvantage, not only poverty but numerous associated conditions, continues to depress African American student performance. The concentrated density of students with these disadvantages in racially and economically homogenous schools depresses it even further. Schools that the most disadvantaged African American children attend are segregated because they are located in segregated low socio-economic neighborhoods, far distant from truly middle-income neighborhoods (Quinlan, 2015; Reardon, 2011; Rothstein 2014). Residing in such high-poverty neighborhoods for multiple generations has added an additional barrier to academic achievement, and multigenerational segregated poverty typifies many African American children today (El Nasser, 2011; Rothstein, 2014,). Education policy is forced by housing policy: it is not possible to desegregate schools without desegregating both low socio-economic and affluent neighborhoods. However, the policy motivation to desegregate

neighborhoods is halted by a growing ignorance of the nation's racial history. Rothstein (2014) noted,

It has become conventional for policymakers to assert that the residential isolation of low-income black children is now '*de facto*,' the accident of economic circumstance, demographic trends, personal preference, and private discrimination. But the historical record demonstrates that residential segregation is "*de jure*," resulting from racially-motivated and explicit public policy whose effects endure to the present (p. 28).

Without awareness of the history of state-sponsored residential segregation, policymakers are unlikely to take meaningful steps to understand or fulfill the constitutional mandate to remedy the racial isolation of neighborhoods, or the school segregation that flows from it (Quinlan, 2015; Rothstein, 2014). Continued failure to inform the younger generation of the historical segregation during formal classroom instruction establishes a misinformed population of future leaders, thus, creating a cycle of ignorance.

### **A Half Century after the Coleman Report**

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 mandated that the U.S. Department of Education examine the obvious inequality of educational opportunities in both elementary and secondary schools across the nation. There was a need to gauge the differences between schools attended by White students and Black students. The more than 700 pages of the Coleman Report (1966) exposed the Black-White Achievement Gap. The Coleman Report (1966) found, among many other discrepancies that in both math and reading, the average Black student in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade placed in the 13<sup>th</sup> percentile of the score

distribution. In other words, 87 percent of White students in grade 12 scored ahead of the average Black 12<sup>th</sup> grader (Camera, 2016).

The nation's attention remains fixed on the persistent Black-White achievement gap and how to close it; but unfortunately, according to Hanushek's (2016) analysis, 50 years later, the Black-White achievement gap has barely narrowed. Currently, the average African American 12<sup>th</sup> grader, according to data from the 2013 National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP), placed only in the 19<sup>th</sup> percentile. The achievement gap has improved slightly more in reading than in math, but after a half century, the average African American student barely scores at the 22<sup>nd</sup> percentile (Camera, 2016). In tracking the gap in nationally normed test scores, the report began with the 1970s and 1980s, when NAEP results reported a period of substantial narrowing of the gap in the academic areas of both reading and math. In the later decades, following the 1980s, there was still no clear trend of change in the gap (Barton & Coley, 2010). In other words, the gap continued to gape with only small gains or declines and years with no change at all (Barton & Coley, 2010; Camera, 2016).

Erick Hanushek, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution of Stanford University and research associate at the National Bureau of Economic Research who authored the analysis of data (Hanushek, 2016) 50 years after the Coleman Report, knew the gap hadn't been closing much. However, he was startled by the data. He was dismayed because of the reports of promising attempts to close the gap, and yet the progress remains minimal (Hanushek, 2016). Continuing the incremental rate of the past 50 years, it is estimated it will take two and a half centuries before the Black-White math gap closes and over one and a half centuries until the reading gap closes (Hanushek, 2016).

Although the Coleman Report uncovered achievement disparities across races and regions, these details were often overlooked and hidden in the 700 plus-page report (Hanushek, 2016). This error seems inconceivable in the current times of accountability and production of outcomes, but the attention in the 1960s was diverted toward the role that families and schools played in achievement (Hanushek, 2016). The staggering discrepancies in the achievement gap found in the Coleman Report didn't make headlines and never received the attention it deserved (Hanushek, 2016; Camera, 2016). The focus was on families and schools, and page after page of achievement differences were ignored. As a result, the Coleman Report failed to accomplish the key objective that initially led Congress to commission the report: the purposeful strides towards equal educational opportunity across racial groups (Hanushek, 2016). According to Hanushek (2016), "If the Coleman Report was expected to mobilize the resources of the nation's schools in pursuit of racial equity, it undoubtedly failed to achieve its objective" (p. 25). He continued, "Nor did it increase the overall level of performance of high school students on the eve of their graduation, despite the vast increase in resources that would be committed to education over the ensuing five decades" (p. 22). The newest analysis of the landmark education report, the Coleman Report, calls this error a "national embarrassment" (Hanushek, 2016, p. 21).

### **Standards, Assessments and Accountability**

Including a brief discussion of the standards, assessments, and accountability movement is warranted in this study for two reasons. First, this movement is credited by some education researchers for exposing the persistent gap in academic achievement between Black and White students to policymakers and the public as well as directing

educators through policy-making to address the achievement gap (Goertz, 2000). Second, this movement is also blamed by other educational researchers for exacerbating the achievement gap (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Sanacore, 2002).

Most literature suggests the accountability movement began with the widely publicized national report, *A Nation at Risk*, authored by a blue-ribbon commission appointed by the Reagan Administration in 1981 (Coeyman, 2003). This report, published in 1983, warned America that educational quality was declining and threatened the economic well-being of the nation. The report suggested that a "rising tide in mediocrity" (U.S. Department of Education, 1983, p. 3) had overtaken the nation's students and schools and suggested a number of improvements that America's educational policymakers could take to help students become more competitive with other industrialized countries (U.S. Department of Education, 1983). As a follow up to *A Nation at Risk*, President George H. W. Bush convened state and national leaders at a National Education Summit in 1989 that created six national education goals which were later codified with two additional goals in the *Goals 2000* legislation passed by Congress and signed into law by President Clinton in 1994 (Vinovskis, 1999). With specificity, the Educate America Act was a directive with the expectation that these eight educational goals would be met by the year 2000. Included in goal number three was a provision that all students would "demonstrate competency" (para. 4) in a number of subjects at grade levels 4, 8, and 12 (Vinovskis, 1999). The Act also established a National Education Standards and Improvement Council to "examine and certify" the various state educational standards and assessments from those states who voluntarily submit them (North Central Regional Education Laboratory, n.d., para. 8).

As many states moved towards developing their own standards and assessments, President George W. Bush and the 108<sup>th</sup> Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002. This legislation mandated that states test students in English and mathematics beginning in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and included provisions for sanctions if schools failed to make substantial progress towards having all students perform at the proficient level. The legislation forced school districts to disaggregate student testing data by major racial and ethnic groups, students with disabilities, students with limited English proficiency, economically disadvantaged students, migrant students and gender (Act, N.C.L.B., 2001). One result of NCLB and the subsequent reporting of the disaggregated data by every school district has been a nation-wide exposure to the Black-White achievement gap because many highly acclaimed school districts are not meeting the standards set forth in the legislation as a result of one or more of their sub-groups having not scored well enough on the state assessments. Often, one of those sub-groups turns out to be African-American students (Chubb & Lovelace, 2002; ACT, N.C.L.B., 2001).

There are some who argue that high-stakes tests are undermining African American achievement. Some educational researchers (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Sanacore, 2002) along with other education groups, including teachers unions such as the National Education Association and other political groups such as the Congressional Black Caucus, argue that the emphasis on test results has negatively affected the quality of teaching (National Education Association, n.d.; Becker, 1998). However, other researchers (Mitchell, 2006; Yeh, 2005) point out that the purported negative impact on student achievement because of high-stakes testing is grounded in opinion more than

thorough empirical research. Typically, those opposed to high-stakes testing argue that important curricular topics are ignored in the classroom if they are not tested.

Researchers also suggested students spend more time preparing for a test rather than learning in the classroom by emphasizing the memorization of facts for a multiple choice test rather than learning broader concepts (Mitchell, 2006; Sanacore, 2002). Political battles over high-stakes testing and other accountability schemes produced by policy-makers, notwithstanding the gap in academic achievement between Black and White students, remain. Regardless of whether the accountability movement helped or hindered issues related to the Black-White achievement gap, some African Americans have been successful.

### **African American Outliers Exist**

What also remains true, and has driven this research study, is that despite government policy that kept millions of African Americans from achieving at the same levels as Whites in the aggregate in the past two hundred or so years, there have been many thousands of African Americans who have succeeded in American schools despite the legal and policy obstacles in their way (Ed Trust, 2014; Ratner, 2008). These African Americans have cleared each purposeful and unintentional hurdle placed in the path to the educational attainment finish line (Harper, 2012; Stayhorn, 2012).

Defying the odds and even the resilience is defined in multiple degrees of achievement throughout the body of research (Ed Trust, 2014; JBHE, 2014; Lewis, Simon, Uzzell, Hertz, & Casserly, 2010). The criteria for overcoming the odds is described as attending an at risk high school, academic struggles in college, assimilating in a predominately white high school or university, or simply the generalized

circumstances associated with being African American (Fletcher, R.P., 2015; Harper, 2012; Lewis, 2008; Lewis, et. al, 2010; Scott, 2011; Williams, N. L.). Therefore, the expectation of what it means to demonstrate academic success is also varied from improvement in test scores slightly closing the achievement gap, graduating high school, completing a bachelor's degree, becoming a school superintendent, securing a high ranking Civil Service position of GS-15, climbing the corporate ladder as a CEO of a Fortune 500 Company or attaining a doctorate degree (Bailey, 1997; Harper, 2012; Nora, 2006; Pruitt, 2015; Randle, 2012; Simmons-Massenburg, 2011; Willis, 2009).

Much of the research inclusive of the Black-White achievement gap leans toward “the nation’s young African American males who are in a state of crisis... a national catastrophe” as described by the Council of the Great City Schools (Lewis, et. al, 2010, (p. 2). These findings indicate that African American males continue to lag far behind their white counterparts in academic achievement and drop out of school at nearly twice the rate as their White schoolmates (Lewis, 2010). Alas, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (as cited in Cataldi, Laird, & Kewal-Ramani, 2009), even 8.4 percent of young, gifted, economically disadvantaged African American males drop out due to disengagement or difficult life circumstances (Cataldi, et al., 2009). In 2008, only 47 percent of African American male students graduated on time from U.S. high schools compared to 78 percent of White male students (Harper, 2012). This data focusing on high school graduation as an academic achievement may seem to not fit into this section, focusing on success of African Americans who defy the odds, but statistics show only 70% of African Americans graduated from high school in 2013 and 59% of African American males (NCES, 2015). The 2012-2013 academic years reported an all-time high

graduation rates in America with an 81% graduation rate, but African Americans continue to lag behind their White peers (NCES, 2015). It is imperative at least one or two paragraphs be dedicated to African Americans successful completion of a high school diploma, which would typically be expected of American students. Unfortunately, even this basic accomplishment continues to evade a large portion of African Americans, but especially African American males (Lewis, et. al, 2010; Maitre, 2014; NCES, 2015; Santelises, 2004). When dealing with the deficit model and reporting of the problems, African American males are typically the focus because they are the most at risk. Just over fifty percent of African American males graduate from high school (Lewis, et. al, 2010). That percentage should strike a chord with any educator or policy maker.

A small fraction of data has been added to the body of research dedicated to “how” and “why” some African Americans successfully negotiate the worlds of school and home and manage to succeed at high levels even when one or both environments present challenges in their lives (Borman & Rachuba, 2001). Research shows that school environments that support high academic performance are those where teacher attitudes, student attitudes, and student achievement-related behaviors positively impact student outcomes, (Borman & Overman, 2004; Martin, 2000; Stayhorn, 2012, 2013; Williams, 2008). Having more knowledge of how and why some African American male high school students can achieve success in widely varying contexts such as predominately White urban-suburban schools, racially mixed schools, densely populated inner-city schools and magnet schools which were choice schools established to promote racial diversity and to improve scholastic standards, is essential (NCES, 2001). Without a high school diploma; a bachelor’s, master’s, or doctorate are not realistic goals. Studies

targeting African American males purposefully focus on the lowest achieving race and gender of Americans (Randle, 2012). Although the graduation percentage of African American males remains the lowest compared to all other races and genders, more African American males are graduating from high school than ever before (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

There are an abundance of studies focused on why African Americans students experience difficulty in colleges and universities, and especially predominately White institutions of learning (Cifax, 2016; Steen, 2014; Thomas, 2005). They face difficulties such as deficient academic preparation, personal problems related to identity issues, and structural racism (Jones, 1993; Tinto, 1993; Delgado, 1989; Fletcher, 2015; Gasman, 2015; Hurtado, 2015; Ogbu, 1978). Yet, qualitative researchers have added to the body of data with those who were able to clear the hurdles of difficulty and completed a bachelor's degree from a predominately White university (Cifax, 2016; Gasman, 2015; Hurtado, 2015; Strayhorn, 2013; Steen, 2014; Thomas, 2005). These researchers have examined African American competitive athletes, African American males, African American females, those who take the junior college or community college indirect route, high achieving students with high potential for achievement and those with low grade point averages resulting in being placed on academic probation (Calhoun, 2016; Fletcher, 2015; Kim, 2014; Perna, 2012). These researchers have attempted to uncover factors that influenced academic success and resilience of African Americans in spite of the challenges faced.

Despite overwhelming evidence of the existence of a glass ceiling, there have been commendable examples of African Americans advancing into senior executive, and

in some cases, chief executive officer (CEO) positions in Fortune 500 companies and even securing high ranking civil service positions. These African Americans have been able to shatter the class ceiling and qualitative researchers have used narrative inquiry, phenomenological design, and case study to discover influences enabling them to overcome the glass ceiling barrier in the White male-dominated cultural environment of U.S. private industry organizations and civil service (Allen-Nichols, 2010; Bailey, 1997; Brinson, 2006; Porter, 2003).

According to the National Science Foundation (2016), universities in the U.S. conferred 55,006 doctorates in 2015, and African American permanent citizens account for 2,281 of those conferred. African Americans earned 6.5 percent of all doctoral degrees awarded. This figure is slightly up from the 2014 survey. The number of African Americans earning doctoral degrees is up 31 percent, but the percentage is increasing at a slow pace (Harper, 2016; JBHE, 2014; National Science Foundation, 2016). In 2005, Blacks were 6.2 percent of the U.S. citizens and permanent residents who earned doctorates (JBHE, 2014; NSF, 2016). In 2015, the figure crept to 6.5 percent (NSF, 2017). There had been a surge in 2013 falling just short of an all-time high of African Americans earning doctorates up 5.3 percent following an 8.3percent increase the year before (NSF, 2014).“A college-educated population results in pivotal benefits to society” (The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2004, p.1). Although African Americans have made steady and notable strides in earning doctoral degree, there remains room for growth and improvement (Harper, 2016).

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Nora's Model of Student Engagement**

Nora's Model of Student Engagement (2006) addresses the pre-college and in-college factors that affect minority persistence to degree completion. The theoretical framework was originally created as a synthesis of existing research to identify the major factors that influence the persistence of Hispanic students in higher education. Using existing theories, Nora devised a model consisting of six major components (see Figure 12): (a) pre-college/pull factors, (b) sense of purpose and institutional allegiance, (c) academic and social experiences, (d) cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes, (e) goal determination/institutional allegiance, and (f) persistence (Nora, 2003) (Figure 12).

**Nora, A. (2006) Student Engagement Model**  
**Theoretical Framework**

*Precollege Factors & Sense of Purpose & Academic & Social Cognitive & Non- Goal Determination/ Persistence Pull-Factors Institutional Experiences Cognitive Outcomes Institutional Allegiance*

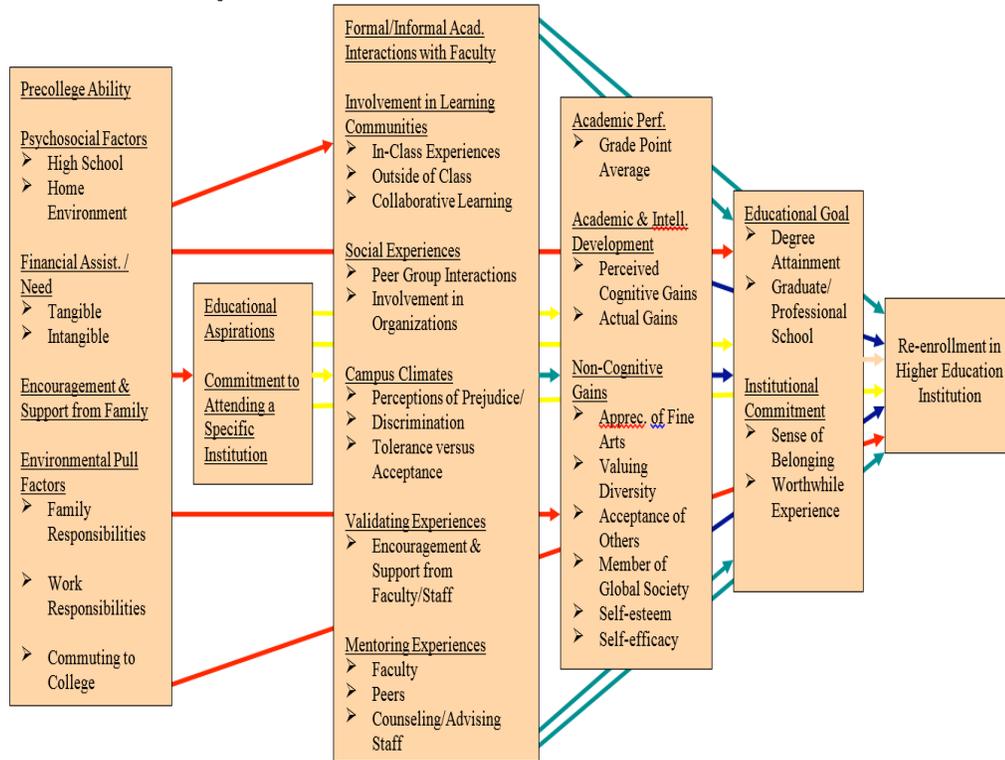


Figure 12. Nora’s (2006) Student Engagement Model including 6 Components

The persistence literature relies predominately on two frameworks for understanding student departure: Tinto’s theory of student departure (1975, 1987) and Bean’s model of student attrition (1980, 1983). Although each model stems from a unique theoretical basis (e.g., Tinto’s model stems from theories of suicide, Bean’s from faculty turnover), both models highlight the importance of background characteristics and student experiences once on campus (Burrus et al., 2013).

The theory of student departure (Tinto, 1975, 1982, 1987, 1993) emphasizes the role of post matriculation campus-based interactions and integration on persistence. The essence of the theory of student departure is that persistence is a function of a

longitudinal process of interactions between students and faculty, staff, and peers in academic and social settings (Tinto, 1993). Positive interactions and involvement in academic and social settings provide students with the ability to understand and assimilate to institutional norms also deemed integration, leading to an elevated commitment to completing college and to the institution itself. Conversely, negative experiences and factors that limit campus involvement weaken intentions and commitments and increase the likelihood of departure. Simply put, “other things being equal, the higher the degree of integration of the individual into the college, the greater will be his/her commitment to the specific institution and the goal of college completion” (Tinto, 1975, p. 96).

Terenzini and Pascarella (1980; see also Cabrera, Castenada, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992) validated the model, showing it is a conceptually useful framework for thinking about the dynamic nature of persistence. However, the model has also received considerable criticism. One criticism of the model is its emphasis on integration. Integration perspectives stress an underlying notion that acculturation is necessary (Hurtado & Carter, 1997) and assume there is a single uniform set of values and attitudes in an institution (Tierney, 1992). Thus, the central premise of integration is that students must relinquish previously held values and adopt the dominant values of an institution. Such a perspective can marginalize minority and nontraditional students whose beliefs and attitudes may run contrary to the dominant values (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). For minority students in particular, the notion that integration relies on the successful abandonment of cultural values that may be central to personal identity, value, and worth calls into question the validity of these models (Burrus et al., 2013).

Indeed, the models appear to have limited applicability with those students classified as nontraditional (Maxwell, 1998; Rendon, Jalomo & Nora, 2000). As originally described, the models excluded external factors such as finances and encouragement from friends and family, which can exert effects on commitment, integration, and ultimately persistence (Burrus et al., 2013).

A competing perspective to the theory of student departure is Bean's (1980, 1983) model of student attrition. Unlike the theory of student departure, which was based on traditional college students, Bean's model was generated to account for external factors that affect the persistence of nontraditional students. These factors, many of which are beyond the control of an institution, affect students by putting pressure on their time, resources, and sense of well-being (Rovai, 2003). However, conceptually, Bean's model is very similar to the theory of student departure in that it emphasizes the ways in which background characteristics and interactions with an institution influence satisfaction, commitment to degree completion, and persistence (Bean, 1980, 1983). Bean's model stresses that student interactions and integration combine with subjective evaluations of the educational process, institution, and experience to directly influence satisfaction and indirectly influence intentions to persist (Himelhoch, Nichols, Ball, & Black, 1997). Simultaneously, external factors over which the institution has no control, such as opportunity to transfer, family commitments, and financial constraints, directly influence intentions to leave and drop out. Thus, external, attitudinal, and interaction factors collectively influence departure or persistence.

Bean's model has also been validated on nontraditional student populations including adult learners (Bean & Metzner, 1985), historically black college and

university students (Himmelhoch et al., 1997), distance learners (Rovai, 2003), and community college students (Sandiford & Jackson, 2003). Many researchers have noted similarities between the models (e.g., Hossler, 1984) in that they understand persistence as a complex set of interactions from which students gauge whether a successful match between them and the institution exists. In fact, Cabrera et al. (1992) examined the overlap between Tinto's model, the theory of student departure (Tinto, 1987), and Bean's (1983) model of student attrition and concluded that many of the constructs in each model underscored the same concept.

Together, the two theoretical perspectives on student persistence provide a holistic accounting of the key factors that shape what students are prepared to do when they get to college and influence the meanings they make of their experiences (Kuh et al., 2006). In other words, the theories emphasize “a series of academic and social encounters, experiences, and forces ... [that] can be portrayed generally as the notions of academic or social engagement or the extent to which students become involved in (Astin, 1985) or integrated (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993) into their institution's academic and social systems” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 425).

Nora's Student Engagement Model was influenced by both Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) and Bean's theory of persistence (1980, 1983), but Nora criticized previous work referring to researchers who focus their attention exclusively on nontraditional students after they have been admitted to college are only addressing part of the problem and may be overlooking what is creating barriers that limit the degree of access for nontraditional students (Nora & Olivia, 2004). Nora's Student Engagement Model (2002, 2003, 2006) includes the factors that influence student retention prior to enrolling and attending

college. The intent of the model is to identify specific latent constructs that have an impact on the decision of undergraduate students to drop out of college or to persist and remain in college. According to Nora and Lang (1999), it is no longer thought that the only factors to consider prior to enrollment in college are the student's academic performance in high school, their rank at the time they graduated, or, at most students' educational aspirations. A set of high school psychological experiences engaged by students prior to enrolling in college as representing precollege student characteristics (Nora & Lang, 1999). The authors went on to find that past experiences to include: leadership opportunities, anticipatory attitudes to attend college, student's sense of social self-efficacy, relationships with peers, and the importance of attending college expressed by parents and other significant adults impacted a student's transition to the college environment as well as the student's decision to persist. The six factors of Nora's (2006) Student Engagement Model will be explained.

### **Pre-college/Pull-factors**

The Student Engagement Model (Nora, 2002, 2003, 2006) hypothesizes that students enter higher education with a set of pre-college characteristics such as high school experiences, academic achievement, specific psychosocial factors developed in the home environment as well as in high school, financial circumstances they bring with them as they enter college, and a variety of pull factors that range from family responsibilities to work responsibilities to extensive commutes to campus that contribute to a student's academic performance, his or her adjustment to college, and ultimately, to his or her decision to remain enrolled. In contrast to the parents of traditional students who can draw on their own personal experiences in higher education and can count on

social networking to improve a child's ability to successfully enroll in, and graduate from college, low-income students from nontraditional families typically prepare for college later in the students' academic careers (Nora & Crisp, 2008). These disadvantaged nontraditional families face more obstacles with fewer resources that can assist their children in achieving their educational aspirations (Auerbach, 2004).

In addition, the model hypothesizes that encouragement by parents and significant others help the student make a successful transition and adjustment to college. The first component of the model addresses the pre-college preparation and pull-factors that deter students from high school completion and higher education. The academic achievement of students in high school academics will help or hinder students' persistence later when they enter college. Additionally, in the first component the student's engagement in high school and the activities they participate in will likely determine their educational aspirations long before the college selection process begins (Nora, 2003). Financial assistance is a great equalizer for minority students from impoverished homes to overcome barriers to higher education (Nora, 2003). Family support is also important in the future persistence of a high school student headed for college. Parental encouragement and support extract a positive effect on a student's initial interest in college and integration into the college environment as well as the student's commitment and decision to remain enrolled in college (Nora & Cabrera, 1996).

Support system through words of encouragement and validation by parents has long been established as significantly impacting on student persistence (Cabrera et al., 1993; Nora, 1987; Nora & Cabrera, 1996). Nora (2004a) considered that encouragement and support come in different forms (e.g., financial, emotional, psychological, etc.) and

from different sources (e.g., parents, other family members, spouses, professors, etc.). En masse these different types of acts of encouragement from a variety of people provide a safety net for nontraditional students that they come to rely on under stressful and non-stressful circumstances (Nora & Crisp, 2008).

### **Sense of Purpose and Institutional Allegiance**

The second component of the model addresses the student's initial commitment to attend a specific institution; allegiance to a specific school will improve the chances of retaining a student once they enroll in college (Nora, 2003). Supportive evidence of this positive influence includes past studies that all found evidence that the student's commitment to an institution put forth a positive effect on the student's decision to remain enrolled in college level education (Nora, 2006). Nora notes that as students enter a higher education institution, they come with a sense of purpose in mind and an institutional allegiance to the college in which they are enrolled (Nora, 2002). Those students whose educational aspirations have been positively formed prior to enrolling in college are more prone to engage in those activities that enhance the student's chances of becoming more academically and socially integrated into their campus environment. Furthermore, those students that are strongly committed to attending a specific institution will also be more likely to engage in academic and social activities that providing them with those experiences necessary to successfully meet the challenges faced during college.

### **Academic and Social Experiences**

Academic and social experiences have been the focus of many higher education administrators because they seem to be the most influential on the persistence and

retention of Hispanic students (Nora, 2002, 2003; Nora & Cabrera, 1996); Nora et. al (2006). Academic experiences include both formal and informal interaction with faculty and campus leaders. Faculty can also have an enormous influence on a student through mentoring and validation in and out of the classroom. These interactions in the academic environment create a positive association between the student and the institution as the student associates the people with the institution. Social experiences include peer group interactions, perceptions of prejudice and discrimination, and encouragement and support from faculty and fellow students. Perceptions of prejudice and discrimination are easily sensed by minority students both in the classroom and on campus (Nora & Cabrera, 1996). As a result, these social experiences affect their academic performance, experiences with faculty, and intellectual development.

College students undergo a variety of academic and social experiences that facilitate their integration both in the classroom as well as outside of class. The level of encouragement and support provided by different members of the academic community through the interaction of the student with faculty and peers in academic and non-academic activities help to form the student's final commitment to the attainment of an undergraduate degree at the respective institution. These academic and non-academic activities include such ventures as participation and involvement in different organizations and clubs on campus, attendance of social events, tutorial assistance, mentoring experiences, classroom validation, and informal academic interaction with faculty (Nora, 2006). Mentoring, based on Cohen's (1996) conceptual framework, helps to shape the student's quest for a college degree, exhibit a high level of commitment to an educational goal, exert effort in his or her studies, and to assist students in making

themselves feel at home in the academic and social culture of their campuses and not an outsider. Several intermediate outcomes are derived as a consequence of students' academic and social experiences during college.

### **Cognitive and Non-Cognitive Outcomes**

Cognitive factors influence persistence including educational grade point averages (GPAs) and the development of students to recognize their obvious real intellectual gains and perceived gains while in college (Nora, 2003). Non-cognitive gains include a greater appreciation for the arts, embracing diversity, and heightened self-esteem. Cognitive, as well as non-cognitive, gains are made by the student in such areas as critical thinking, science reasoning, reading comprehension, appreciation of fine arts, acceptance of diversity in people and thoughts, and conceptualization skills, and course grades. Cognitive and non-cognitive factors influence whether or not a student remains committed to the university which leads to reenrollment and persistence to graduation (Nora, 2003).

### **Goal Determination/Institutional Allegiance and Persistence**

Goal determination and institutional allegiance relates to the extent students are determined to attain their future goals that may include going to graduate school. Allegiance to the institution refers to the student's perceived sense of belonging and whether the college experience has been worthwhile and meaningful (Nora, 2003). Nora hypothesizes that part of those gains includes the development of resilient behavior and attitudes necessary to offset any negative experiences that the student might encounter (Nora, 2006).

Lastly, the aforementioned five components of Nora's Model of Student Engagement are related to some way to lead to the final and sixth component of persistence (Nora, 2003). Persistence refers to whether the university is successful in creating a space where the student feels passionate enough about his/her education to reenroll in the institution of higher education.

Researchers have added to the investigation of resiliency of nontraditional students and used Nora's ideas to provide additional researcher to the existing body of literature. These guru researchers of academic persistence focusing on nontraditional students include: Dr. Marybeth Gasman, Dr. Laura W. Perna, Dr. Sylvia Hurtado, Dr. Shawn Harper, and Dr. Terrell Strayhorn.

Dr. Marybeth Gasman is Professor of Higher Education in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania. Her areas of expertise include the history of American higher education, Minority Serving Institutions (with an emphasis on Historically Black Colleges and Universities), racism and diversity, fundraising and philanthropy, and higher education leadership (University of Pennsylvania, 2017).

Dr. Laura W. Perna is a James S. Riepe Professor and founding Executive Director of the Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy (AHEAD) at the University of Pennsylvania. She is also chair of the Faculty Senate at the University of Pennsylvania, chair of the Higher Education Division of the Graduate School of Education, faculty fellow of the Institute for Urban Research, faculty affiliate of the Penn Wharton Public Policy Initiative, member of the advisory board for the Netter Center for Community Partnerships, and member of the Social Welfare Graduate Group of the School of Social Policy and Practice. Dr. Perna's research examines the ways that social

structures, educational practices, and public policies promote and limit college access and success, particularly for individuals from lower-income families and racial/ethnic minority groups (University of Pennsylvania, 2017).

Dr. Sylvia Hurtado is Professor at the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at UCLA, in the Division of Higher Education and Organizational Change. She is currently Director of the Higher Education Research Institute, which houses the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP). CIRP is the longest-running empirical study of higher education involving data collection on students and faculty. She is past President of the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE), and served on the boards of the Higher Learning Commission and initiatives of the Association of American Colleges and Universities. Her numerous publications focus on undergraduate education, student development in college, and diversity in higher education (UCLA, 2017).

Dr. Shaun R. Harper is a tenured faculty member in the Graduate School of Education, Africana Studies, and Gender Studies. He is also co-founder of the Penn GSE Grad Prep Academy. Professor Harper maintains an active research agenda that examines race and gender in educational and social contexts, Black male college access and achievement, the effects of education policies and campus environments on student outcomes, and college student engagement (University of Pennsylvania, 2017).

Dr. Terrell Strayhorn, who holds a bachelor's and a master's from the University of Virginia and a Ph.D. in higher education from Virginia Tech, joined the OSU faculty in 2010 and became the youngest full professor in the university's history in 2014. He was the founding director of OSU's Center for Inclusion, Diversity and Academic

Success (IDEAS). Strayhorn gives frequent talks and lectures across the country, addressing issues of nontraditional student success and achievement (Ohio State University, 2017).

These researchers are currently leading the work in an effort to understand the anti-deficit view of nontraditional students in higher education. These investigators have all published numerous articles, and written, collaborated and edited numerous books. Three of the five researchers, Harper, Hurtado, and Perna, are from the University of Pennsylvania in the Graduate School of Education (2017).

### **Summary**

Chapter II explains the nature of the Black-White Achievement Gap. It then goes on to drag the reader through the historical timeline of the Black-White achievement gap followed by ways that the Black-White achievement gap has been exposed through accountability and testing. The literature review provides hope when statistical and descriptive information is revealed highlighting the growth, success, and academic achievement of African Americans. Finally, Nora's (2003) model is described. Nora's (2003) six components are explained, and examples are given concerning how they have been applied to previous research.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of six successful African Americans who achieved success despite growing up in high poverty situations in an effort to gain a more encompassing, realistic, and intimate understanding of how and why they were able to overcome dismal circumstances associated with poverty. These individuals attained academic learning, success, and achievement after graduating from a Midwestern state's low socioeconomic urban public high school, completing a bachelor's degree, a master's degree when required, and finally a doctorate, resulting in a better quality of life. The desire is to gain a deeper, richer, more insightful understanding of the factors which led to their academic success.

The framework for this qualitative case study is outlined in this chapter. The focal point in conducting this research was qualitative in nature (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, 2003; Merriam, 2002).

The following research questions served as a focus to guide this inquiry,

Primary Research Question:

What factors or experiences do these selected African American participants, who have completed a doctoral program, report as influencing their educational success?

Sub-questions:

1. What personal qualities/attributes can be identified as contributing to their success?
2. What K-12 experiences/critical incidents have contributed to their success?
3. How did relationships contribute to the success of these individuals?

### **Research Design**

Since the current research regarding African American student achievement focuses on obstacles and barriers, often using a quantitative stance or mixed method studying a representative sample and analyzing the resulting data using a given statistical model, the “real” voices of the study participants are typically not heard. I selected a case study approach for the design of the qualitative study of successful African Americans. Yin (2014) noted, “As a research method, the case study is used in many situations, to contribute knowledge of individual, group, organizational, social, political, and related phenomena” (p.4). Case studies allow for the data to emerge and evolve while the researcher can gain a deeper understanding of the central phenomenon and the individual participants. Patton (2002) stated, “If individuals or groups are the primary unit of analysis, then case studies of people or groups may be the focus for case studies” (p.439). Yin (2014) goes on to add, “A case study allows investigators to focus on a ‘case’ and

retain a holistic and real-world perspective” (p. 4). No variables were manipulated in this study, as the researcher will explore the real people and their authentic experiences.

Overall, Stake (1978) maintained that the case study research method was best utilized when adding to an existing experience and humanistic understanding. Similar to Stake’s explanation of case study research method, Yin (2014) described the case study method as a preferred research method when the “how” or “why” research questions are addressed, a researcher has little or no control over behavior and the focus of the study is mainly exploratory. The goal of case study research is to rely on the participants’ views of the situation (Yin, 2014).

In a case study approach, the researcher explores an issue or problem, and a detailed understanding develops from analyzing a case (Creswell, 2013). Merriam (1998) postulated the outcome of a case study results as a rich description of the phenomenon being studied; case study research is suitable for research presented as a detailed account of a phenomenon being studied and reports the findings in a detailed description rather than presenting the outcome in statistical data. Wilson described case study findings as those reported by using “prose and literary techniques to describe, elicit images, and analyze situations” (as cited in Merriam, 1998, p. 31). In further explaining the importance of a process rather than an outcome, Sanders stated, “Case studies help us to understand the process of events, projects, and programs and to discover the context characteristics that will shed light on an issue or object” (as cited in Merriam, 1998, p. 33).

## **Social Constructivist Epistemology**

The epistemological perspective of this study is social constructivism. Social constructivists hold assumptions that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. The goal of the research is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation being studied and construct the meaning of a situation often forged in discussions or interactions with other people (Creswell, 2014).

Additionally, Creswell (2009) posits that the emphasis of a constructivist study is the understanding of participants' perspectives as they develop "subjective meanings of their experiences" through "interaction with others" (p.8).

## **Qualitative Research**

There are two primary and distinct methods used in obtaining data in research: quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative research takes into account a numerical and statistical stance on collecting and analyzing data as compared to qualitative research. Qualitative research relates more to a descriptive method of collecting, describing, analyzing, and reporting data. An important characteristic that distinguishes a quantitative study from a qualitative study is the way in which qualitative studies consider a problem. A case study questions the open-ended nature to the inquiry. Although quantitative results can be used to gain insight to the characteristics of groups or specific cases, quantitative studies miss the in-depth, personal perception that statistical data may not capture. The significance in selecting qualitative research for the present study was to explore and give a voice to participants (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

As Miles and Huberman (1994) emphasized, “Qualitative data are sexy. They are a source of well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of processes in identifiable local contexts” (p. 1). Qualitative researchers strive to understand the meaning people have constructed and desire to understand how people make sense of their world and the experiences they had in the world (Merriam, 1998). Qualitative data allow individuals to understand precisely which actions led to certain consequences and gain prolific explanations (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For this study, the researcher’s goal was to understand how and why successful African-Americans were able to overcome dismal circumstances associated with poverty and attending a high poverty, urban public school and how they advanced to earn a professional degree and a better quality of life.

### **Qualitative Methodology**

Qualitative research is based on a world view which is holistic and includes the following beliefs: there is no one single reality; reality is based upon perceptions that are different for each individual and changes over time; and, what we know has meaning only within a given situation of context (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative research methodologies offer the opportunity to put a “face” on the numbers represented in empirical studies (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Creswell describes the research problem in a qualitative study as one resulting in a void in the literature, a topic that has been neglected in the literature: a need to lift up the voice of the marginalized participants (2014). Understanding the lived experiences of people requires a deep investigation of their perceptions about local and particular phenomena and enabling people to take action that necessarily impact their lives requires an investigation of their perceptions of the larger world around them. According to Creswell (2009) qualitative research focuses on

the inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting.

### **Methodological Procedures**

Within the public school setting, a good deal of research has been conducted to study what academic and social deficiencies African American students have that may negatively impact their academic success. Researchers have called this the "Deficit Theory" (Moore, 2004). This study did not utilize this deficit approach; in contrast, it focused on the perspectives of successful African American students who overcame the difficulties of growing up in an impoverished situation to earn a professional degree. This study learned from six African Americans deemed as academically successful: those who graduated from a high poverty, urban high school and went on to achieve a degree from a college or university, completed post-graduate studies and then went on to attain professional degrees. As established through the review of literature, an overall limited body of research on academic resilience exists, but especially for such an extreme case requiring such high standards of degree completion coupled with participants from distal risk.

The present study employed a case study design with an emphasis on understanding the perspectives of each of the selected participants. Understanding the lived experiences of people required a deep investigation of their perceptions about local and particular phenomena and enabling people to take actions that necessarily impacted

their lives required an investigation of their perceptions of the larger world (Creswell, 2014).

Yin (2014) defined a case study research method as an “empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 16). Yin added, Case study research copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest rather than points, and as one result relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion, and as another result benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis. (p. 17)

As Stake (1978) emphasized, the case need not be a person or enterprise. It can be whatever “bounded system” is of interest. An institution, a program, a responsibility, a collection, or a population can be the case. This is not to trivialize the notion of “case” but to note the generality of the case study method in preparation for noting its distinctiveness (p. 7). For this study, the case was bound by participant characteristics, geographic location, and time. Each participant in this study attended high school in a high-poverty urban district in a Midwestern state and continued his/her education to earn a doctoral degree. The researcher gathered multiple sources of data including participant interviews, observations, and document analysis to investigate how these participants were able to overcome the distal risk factors to achieve academic success and a higher quality of life.

The purpose of this study was to understand how and why these African-Americans were able to defy the odds and uncover the themes that emerged from these

individual's lived experiences and how those themes influenced their success. A case study method was optimal for this particular inquiry because the researcher was looking to discover the participant perceptions regarding factors that led to their success. To gather rich descriptive data, I asked probing, open-ended questions during individual interviews of African Americans who have reached the peak of educational completion while overcoming the associated risks with attending an impoverished urban high school provided sexy qualitative data (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

### **Population and Sampling**

The population references a group of individuals who share a common characteristic, while the sample is a smaller version of the entire population (Creswell, 2012). Sampling must be consistent with the aims and assumptions essential to qualitative research (Patton, 1990). Qualitative inquiry typically focuses in depth on relatively small samples. Purposeful sampling allows the researcher to find sufficient cases that meet the pre-defined criteria, are willing to participate in the study, and can provide information-rich narrative data for analysis (Patton, 2002; Stake, 2005).

The present study used purposeful sampling to identify six participants who grew up in a low socio-economic home, graduated from a large, urban, high-poverty high school located in a large school district in a Midwestern state where 90% of the students in the district qualified for free or reduced lunch. According to the school district's web page and the 2016-2017 Statistical Profile, the school district is the largest school district in the Midwestern state with approximately 46,000 students enrolled. The district is a majority minority district; only fifteen percent of the student population identify as White. There are eleven high schools serving the district; five high schools were

represented in this study by the six participants. Additionally, the participants demonstrated academic achievement by earning a doctorate degree.

According to Patton (2002) purposeful criterion sampling is considered a strength with intended focus in qualitative sampling. This power and logic of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources (Patton, 1990). According to Merriam (1998), “Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p.61). Moreover, purposeful sampling was most appropriate as the participants were unusual or special. The logic of purposeful sampling is that lessons may be learned about unusual conditions or extreme outcomes that are relevant to improving more typical programs (Patton, 2002). I utilized purposeful sampling in this case study and chose with specificity, cases from which maximum discovery of issues of central importance to the purpose of informing the research questions. As the researcher, I studied this case in terms of its own situational issues, interpreted any patterns within this case, and analyzed the findings to provide more insight and understanding about the case (Stake, 2006). The use of six subjects allowed me to obtain a breadth of data from African American outliers while gathering a depth of data from each individual subject.

Although both Chapters I and II document the Black-White achievement gap across socioeconomic lines on every assessment and academic achievement level, I selected this sample population of participants from high poverty and urban schools. According to the statistics, these African Americans are least likely to achieve academic success. Documented African American academic achievement has varied from

improvement in test scores, graduating from high school, completing a two year college, earning a bachelor's degree, or a master's degree (Lewis, et.al. 2010; Maitre, 2014; NCES, 2015; Randle, 2012; Santelises, 2004). Earning a doctorate is an esteemed academic accomplishment regardless of traditional or nontraditional students and causes eyebrows to rise when a person is introduced with the title, Doctor. Therefore, I selected a sampling of participants from the population least likely to achieve educational success as defined by this study, earning a doctorate.

The identification of high achieving African Americans from an impoverished home and graduating from an urban low socioeconomic high school could have been difficult, but my professional, private, and spiritual life all gave me access to successful African Americans meeting the criteria for this study. A letter of introduction to the research project explaining the study accompanied the request for participation in the study (Appendix C). Participants who fit the required criteria of qualifying for free or reduced lunch, graduating from an urban low socio-economic high school and achieving academic learning and achievement, resulting in a professional degree placed each participant in the small percentage of African Americans in this country earning a doctorate degree (JBHE, 2015).

### **Data Collection**

Qualitative data are usually collected through interview protocols, and interviewing participants is a process. As Patton (1990) explains:

We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe . . . we cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to

what goes on in the world. We have to ask people questions about those things.

As Patton explains, “The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person’s perspective.” (p. 196)

Interviews are guided questions that provide the researcher with information that cannot be obtained in any other way, and the stream of questions in a case study interview is more likely to be fluid rather than rigid (Yin, 2014). Therefore, I designed my interview questions so that their responses would allow me to step into the real world of these successful African Americans. Although stringent guidelines to conducting effective case study research do not exist, researchers have identified reliable attributes of effective case study researchers. Yin (2014) described successful case study researchers as having the ability to “ask good questions, be a good listener, stay adaptive, have a firm grasp of issues being studied, and avoid biases” (p. 73). Since semi-structured interviews allow the opportunity to deviate from the primary question and probe a response to gain a deeper understanding, data collection for this study utilized semi-structured interviews with the participants (Yin, 2014).

Semi-structured interviews lie between a highly structured and unstructured interview process. This type of interview typically incorporates structured questions while allowing the participant to add more detailed information while recalling the lived experience. Additionally, in a semi-structured interview, I remained flexible and asked probing questions to rekindle memories and helped provide clarity to deepen participant responses (Merriam, 1998). In a semi-structured interview, as Merriam (1998) described, specific information is desired from all of the respondents, in which case there is a highly structured section to the interview. But the largest part of the interview is guided by a list

of questions or issues to be explored, and neither the exact wording nor the order of the questions is determined ahead of time (p. 74).

For this study, I determined interviews were the best instrument to provide the most useful information in answering the research questions. The interview process enabled the collection of the participants' views, and their reflections based on recalling experiences. In-person interviews were conducted in order to observe nonverbal cues of the participants and clarify information the participants communicated during the interview. In addition, personal interviews decrease the occurrence of the researcher misinterpreting or making assumptions regarding participants' responses (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2014). The interview protocol is provided in Appendix B.

In-depth, semi structured interviews were used as a primary data source in order to provide detailed cases of African American's who defied the odds. The semi-structured interview format, focusing on several questions while allowing the participants to freely converse about their academic experience, was best suited for this case study. Creating open-ended quality questions to ask during the interview was essential. The questions were designed to draw out the lived experiences of the participant as they took a close look back and told their stories.

Participants were interviewed in person. One individual interview, lasting approximately 45 minutes, with an additional follow-up interview was conducted with each participant where I was able to obtain the first person accounts of their experiences in high poverty urban schools, completion of undergraduate and graduate school leading to a professional degree. Participants were asked to keep a journal and respond to the two prompts selected and to document thoughts they had after the first interview and to jot

down any additional information they wanted to include during the follow-up interview. The follow-up interview was an opportunity for the participants to share their responses to the journal questions and any additional thoughts, feelings, or accounts they wanted to share. Only one participant returned the journal to me; the other five held on to the journal and began to share with me from notes jotted down in the journal. The follow-up interview was also audio-recorded and transcribed. The researcher delineated the process employed to develop the interview protocol, secured the interviews, conducted semi-structured in-person interviews, recorded the interviews, and transcribed the interviews.

In case study research, the most commonly used research methods are observation, interview, and artifact analysis (Stake, 2005, 2006). Since the focus of the present study was on the contextual factors that influenced resiliency decisions occurring in the past, observation was not as appropriate in this study as it is for other case study research designs. However, field notes were recorded as the participant was observed in his/her natural setting. Observing the participant at work or in another natural setting provided additional information regarding each participant's interactions with others and personal characteristics that led to his/her success.

Additionally, I used observation during the interview and recorded the nonverbal communication from the participants, as well. I then analyzed artifacts, documents deemed symbolic of success, accomplishment, and valued by each participant. The artifacts from high school, college, professional careers, and personal lives that signify achievement were analyzed creating a holistic picture of the participant. Artifacts such as yearbooks, photos, scrapbooks, framed college degrees, personal notes, office decor and awards earned were analyzed. Connections, similar experiences, similar divergences and

commonalities among participants were analyzed to establish if there was a particular strategy or set of strategies, factors or attributes that led to their success and persistence.

### **Data Analysis**

The process of data analysis involves the following: examining, organizing, coding, forming themes and patterns, and recombining evidence to produce empirically based findings (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). Analyzing case study data is difficult, especially because universally accepted and defined techniques do not exist (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2014). In case study research, it is challenging to manage the data due to the considerable amount of raw data collected (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998). Creswell (2013) referred to data analysis as a data analysis spiral where the process is simultaneous and interrelated, instead of distinct, sequential steps.

Following all of the interviews, grouping the common factors into categories allowed me to attain the goal of utilizing the case study design to categorize the essential factors that impacted the success of African Americans who defied the odds. A special effort was made to uncover potentially meaningful and common characteristics, factors, and individual experiences of students that may have contributed to the academic success and degree completion for students who, according to experts, had a low probability of success due to distal risk.

In case study research, emergent themes become apparent throughout the research process. I analyzed data by listening for repetitive language and feelings stated by the participants, listening for resonant metaphors used by the subjects to explain their experiences, triangulating data from different sources, and finally constructing themes and revealing patterns based on all the data collected. Through continuous reflection on

subjects' experiences in context, I was able to identify common themes between the participants while also being attentive to divergent patterns within each individual case (Stake, 2006). Note cards were used to record key points within each interview, observation, artifact, and participant journal information, and the primary data analysis came from driving eight hours weekly on the highway to and from work, listening to the recorded interviews repeatedly of the participants. I was able to relive the interactions and responses so that the "real" voices were heard. For this study, I used Creswell's (2013) data analysis spiral to analyze the data collected: 1. Organizing the data 2. Reading and memoing 3. Describing, classifying, and interpreting the data into codes and themes 4. Interpreting the data 5. Representing and visualizing the data. (p. 183)

Of the three primary methodologist in case study research: Merriam, Stake, and Yin, I decided to follow Merriam's rendition for data analysis. Although different in many ways, Merriam's model of qualitative data analysis for case study seemed to compliment both Stake's and Yin's version of case study. Merriam's definition of qualitative data analysis seemed to provide a more thorough application of constructivist epistemology in research and provided more concrete guidance for me (Yazan, 2015).. She defined data analysis as "the process of making sense out of the data. And making sense out of data involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and the researcher has seen and read—it is the process of making meaning" (Merriam, 1998, p. 178). Merriam was expatiated on the importance of simultaneous data collection and analysis and provided a more thorough description and exhaustive guidance for analysis of qualitative data. Stake described Merriam's data collection and analysis as a combination of "persuasion and recipes" since she presents step-by-step instructions for

the implementation of each one of the qualitative analytic techniques and protocols considered to be essential tools needed to develop theory from the data we are analyzing (Yazan, 2015).

Merriam's model for managing data also complimented both Stake's and Yin's account, especially those investigators who want to make use of computer software (Yazan, 2015). First, I organized the data by converting the data into computer files (Creswell, 2013). Using an application, I took pictures of all the notecards and the digital component allowed me to manipulate the cards and keep them in an organized file. Following the organization of the data, I recorded notes when reviewing the transcripts, and created categories or codes (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998). When transitioning to the describing, classifying, and interpreting data phase of the data analysis spiral, I coded the data (Creswell, 2013). During the coding phase, I made preliminary counts of data codes to determine how frequently the codes appeared in the data (Creswell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Once the data was coded, I was able to identify emergent categories or themes (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Clustering the information into themes made the data manageable and assisted in conceptualizing the data (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998).

### **Researcher Role**

In keeping with the tradition of qualitative inquiry, I recognized I am the data collection instrument in this study (Merriam, 1998). I conducted all the semi-structured interviews, transcribed and analyzed the data and applied the theoretical framework to the findings from this study. Believing that all data is filtered through the lens of the researcher, and that data is influenced by one's race, class, gender, and social

experiences, I fully acknowledged my subjectivity regarding the experiences of African-Americans who qualify as a sample participant. After successful defense of this dissertation topic, I will qualify as one of those African Americans who defied the odds. I argue that the educational environment we must navigate is difficult, filled with obstacles such as the various attitudes, expectations, responses, policies, and relationships associated with the road to academia. The major contributor to the credibility of a qualitative inquiry is determined by the credibility of the researcher. As an African American female growing up in a high poverty environment and a school teacher and administrator spending the majority of my career in urban low-socioeconomic schools, I am keenly aware of the biases I bring to this study in regards to the barriers faced by the participants. However, I sought to serve as an objective observer as I collected and analyzed data. I distanced my own personal experiences from the data collected so that the voices of these participants emerged.

Glesne (1999) indicates that study participants are more likely to talk with less restraint about personal or sensitive issues once they know the researcher; therefore, consideration was given to the “insider” status. This bias awareness was influential in my purposefulness of fidelity and credibility. Moreover, Johnson-Bailey (2004) posited that it is generally accepted that researching within cultural boundaries provides groundwork on which to construct trust and dialogue. The common bonds of race and growing up in the same socio-economic subgroup provided the foundation of trust and rapport with the participants of this study. As the researcher can be perceived as a friend having membership to the marginalized group as well as a professional, the participants likely trusted me first, and then entrusted me to tell their stories truthfully, without

reservation. I believe the foundation of commonalities created a friendship, and therefore, I was able to gather thick, rich data from each of the participants during the interviews.

Awareness of my “insider” status, informed me of the likelihood of a struggle to remain objective throughout the process. As the researcher, my self-awareness when collecting data from participants reduced the chance of it impacting the validity of the research (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Each participant’s story and the accompanying data collection and analytic process was a balancing act whether you’re an insider or an outsider. Researchers must understand how power can influence the relationship, historical positions, and even patterns of relationships between the researcher and the researched. There is not a known research methodology that can provide an exact balance for telling and representing and remain steadfast and vigilant to provide balance of the voices, recognize political agendas, and societal hierarchies encircling the process (Johnson-Bailey, 2004)..

As a qualitative researcher, I am self-aware of my bias. Additionally, this work is my passion and has created burning questions needing answers. I intend to continue my work as an educational leader to make a difference in the educational environments I serve and will do nothing other than seek honest, meaningful, credible, and empirically supported findings (Patton, 2002). It was my intent to remain neutral as an investigator: I realized and believed in the value of having no theory to prove or any predetermined results to support. I had a commitment to discover and understand the phenomenon of African American outliers. Additionally, I also saw the benefits of being viewed as an “insider” when conducting interviews to collect data to gain trust quickly and draw out the lived experiences of the participants.

## **Validity and Reliability**

Qualitative research studies are often questioned or doubted due to the fact that the traditional marks of trustworthiness in research, validity and reliability, cannot be measured in the same way in a qualitative study as they can be in a quantitative one (Merriam, 1998). However, because assuring the quality of the study is important to producing trustworthy results, reliability and validity have to be redefined in order to establish multiple ways of establishing authenticity through qualitative research (Golafshani, 2003). Although reliability and validity are treated separately in quantitative research studies, they are viewed collectively in qualitative research studies (Golafshani, 2003).

While the terms validity and reliability are essential criterion for quality in quantitative research, in qualitative research, the terms credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability are used when referring to reliability, and the terms quality, rigor, and trustworthiness are used when referring to validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition, to show the interconnectedness of reliability and validity, Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated, “Since there can be no validity without reliability, a demonstration of the former [validity] is sufficient to establish the latter [reliability]” (p. 316). Although some qualitative researchers do not believe validity is applicable to qualitative research studies, researchers realize there is still a need for checks and measures for their research (Golafshani, 2003). Ensuring validity and reliability is important since human beings are the primary instrument of data collection and analysis in qualitative research, and interpretations of realities are assessed during interviews (Golafshani, 2003; Merriam, 1998).

During the interview process, as stated by Merriam (1998), “We are closer to reality than if a data collection instrument had been interjected between us and the participants. Most agree that when reality is viewed in this manner, internal validity is a definite strength of qualitative research” (p. 203). Also, according to Merriam, “Reliability refers to the extent to which research findings can be replicated” (p. 205). One could also ask, if the study was repeated, would it produce the same results? Because human behavior is fluid, reliability can be problematic in qualitative research.

During the interview process in this study, I followed an interview protocol to ensure as high a degree of standardization among the interviews as possible using the interview questions as a blueprint, but I realized the order of questions could change with different participants, according to their responses. This was the reason for the follow-up interview. I depicted extensive steps in the process of data collection and the analysis of the data in order to ensure the reliability of the study. I utilized copious validation strategies for this study. For example, I clarified my own biases by commenting on my own past experiences as an African American identifying with the participants in this study, and how those experiences may affect my own interpretations of the data. From the very beginning of the research study, it was essential for me to clarify my own experiences with transparency realizing how possible bias may impact the research process (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998).

In order to validate this study’s findings, I conducted member checks with the participants. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described member checks as “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314). Member checking consists of taking data and interpretations back to the participants in the study so that they can confirm the

credibility of the information and narrative account. For this study, the interviews were audio recorded with the permission of each participant. Audio recording the interviews allowed for an accurately recorded artifact of the conversations that were utilized during the data analysis portion of the study, as well (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). Also, as a qualitative researcher, I personally transcribed each interview in order to provide data that captured the details of the interviews and converted the data to a computer document for later analysis (Creswell, 2013). Following each interview, I asked participants to read the transcripts, and verify my documented notes to further maintain validity. The initial transcript and notes from the observation were e-mailed to the participant for member checking. The second set of transcribed data was then e-mailed to the participant after the follow-up interview where the journal and artifacts were shared and discussed (Appendix C). This process further promoted validity and transparency between the researcher and the participant.

In addition, I used peer reviews as another validation strategy (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998). A peer review is the review of the data and research process by someone who is familiar with the research or phenomenon being explored. A peer reviewer provides support, plays devil's advocate, challenges the researcher's assumptions, and asks hard questions about research methods and interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this study, peer reviews were used during the development of the instrument and the data collection. Prior to the completion and implementation of the instrument, a panel of experts, all current practitioners who hold their doctorates, reviewed the instrument and provided feedback. Also, for this study, I asked two colleagues who earned their doctoral degrees, and who were familiar with the

qualitative research process to examine the data collection process and provide feedback on the findings as they emerged. The trustworthiness table lists the measures taken by the researcher to produce trustworthy results while defining reliability and validity to establish unadulterated results through qualitative research (Golafshani, 2003).

### **Confidentiality**

Ensuring confidentiality of the six participants in my study involved masking and protecting the identities of the participants to protect them from any potential harm. I honored a commitment to my participants' confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms for individuals. I also used more general terms and descriptions of the K-12 schools, district, and the universities attended by the participants. The Informed Consent Form, included in Appendix F, was shared with each participant prior to the beginning of the initial interview. This document clearly outlined the purpose of the study along with the procedures, and included a signed guarantee that every effort would be made to protect the participants' confidentiality.

Table 1

*Trustworthiness: Establishing Validity and Reliability*

<b>Trustworthiness Strategy</b>	<b>Steps to Improve Trustworthiness Criteria/Technique</b>	<b>Application of Trustworthiness</b>	<b>Evidence of Trustworthiness</b>
<b>Credibility</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prolonged Engagement</li> <li>• Persistent Observation</li> <li>• Member Checking</li> </ul>	<p>In the field from June 2017 to November 2017 for initial and follow-up interviews as well as journal sharing and observations in naturalistic settings; follow-up communication occurred in December 2017 and January 2018: e-mails, face-to-face, telephone calls, and text messages</p>	<p>Built Trust</p> <p>Developed relationship</p> <p>Built Rapport</p> <p>Obtained in-depth data</p> <p>Obtained Accurate Data</p> <p>Members confirmed credibility of information and narrative account of researcher's interpretations</p>
<b>Transferability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thick Rich Descriptions</li> <li>• Triangulation</li> </ul>	<p>Multiple sources of data: interview notes, audio recording of interviews, interview transcripts, observations, participant journals, and artifacts; dense description of data was supported by direct quotations from participants; transparency of researcher bias</p>	<p>Verified data to be accurate and free from researcher bias</p> <p>Utilization of copious validation strategies</p>

<b>Dependability &amp; Confirmability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Purposive Sampling</li> <li>• Confidentiality</li> <li>• Audio Recorded Interviews</li> <li>• Verbatim Transcripts</li> <li>• Copious/Detailed notes of nonverbal behavior</li> <li>• Peer Review</li> <li>• Access to an Audit Trail</li> </ul>	Selection of participants was purposeful, interview protocol approved by advisor and peers, informed consent was obtained from each participant, researcher transcribed all interviews verbatim while taking detailed notes, several hours spent with peers who challenged the researcher to communicate the story of the participants, all data are stored safely in protected confidential files	Saturation of information  Audio recordings, field notes transcribed notes are safely stored  Peer review done by advisor and two experts in qualitative research added to dependability
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### **Limitations of Study**

This study was not intended to generalize the manifestations of African Americans who defy the odds, but rather explore the phenomenon of why and how these participants experienced success. My intent was to discover associated success factors from the perspective of the African American outlier who has experienced academic achievement at the highest level. The presence of the researcher was a limitation when interviewing participants (Creswell, 2009). The time constraint for conducting the interviews and observations in the natural setting served as an additional limitation. Stake (1995) identified a profound limitation stating that, “Many a researcher would like to tell the whole story but of course cannot; the whole story exceeds anyone’s knowing, and anyone’s telling” (p.240). Although the whole story cannot be told, as the instrument in the study, it was my responsibility to collect an abundance of data to better understand

the phenomenon of African American outliers and then be able to share the rich-thick descriptions of their lived experiences.

### **Summary**

This qualitative case study used the semi-structured interview method to capture the detailed perspectives of six African Americans who attained a doctorate after defying the odds of graduating from a low socio-economic urban high school. Chapter III explains the steps I took as the researcher; I used purposeful sampling to identify participants to reach a sample size of six participants from the population. Each participant was asked to participate in the study to provide responses to interview questions in order to add to the depth and understanding of the information gathered. In order to enhance the validity and reliability of this study, I implemented several validation strategies, such as an interview protocol, clarification of researcher bias, member checks, and peer reviewers (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994). When analyzing the data for this study, the researcher used Creswell's (2013) data analysis spiral. The researcher converted the data into computer files to organize the data, and recorded notes when reviewing the interview transcripts (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998). When reviewing the data, I coded the information and organized the data into themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Merriam, 1998; Creswell, 2013).

Chapter IV presents the stories of each of the six participants. Chapter V discusses the major emergent themes after analysis of the finding. Chapter VI concludes the study applying the theoretical framework of Nora's Student Engagement Model (2002, 2003, 2006) as a lens to view those themes and provide implications.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of six successful African Americans who achieved success despite growing up in high poverty situations in an effort to gain a more encompassing, realistic, and intimate understanding of how and why they were able to overcome dismal circumstances associated with poverty. These individuals attained academic learning, success, and achievement after graduating from a Midwestern state's low socioeconomic urban public high school, completing a bachelor's degree, a master's degree when required, and finally a doctorate, resulting in a better quality of life. The desire is to gain a deeper, richer, more insightful understanding of the factors which led to their academic success.

The first two chapters of this document provided an introduction and background information explaining the scope and nature of the Black-White achievement gap. The third chapter included information about the methods used to conduct this study and how they would assist in answering the research questions. Chapter IV presents the case of the six African Americans who participated in this research.

The focal point in conducting this research is qualitative in nature (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, 2003; Merriam, 2002). For this study, the case is bound by participant characteristics, geographic location, and time. The goal of this case study research relied on the participants' views of the situation (Yin, 2014).

### **Participants**

Six high achieving African Americans, four men and two women, who were raised in impoverished homes and graduated from a Midwestern state's low socioeconomic high school who went on to earn a doctorate, participated in this study. The identification of academically successful African Americans was not difficult; the researcher was able to identify a total of twenty-one men and women. The e-mailed invitation to participate in the study (Appendix C) was sent prior to the first interview. From this invitation ten met three of the four criteria: identify as an African American, graduate from a Midwestern state's low socioeconomic high school, qualified for the Federal Lunch Program, and went on to earn a doctorate. Six graduated from a neighboring school district with similar demographics but not the one identified in this case study, and the remaining four did not come from an economically disadvantaged home. The other eleven met all the criteria to participate in the study as identified in the invitation. Six participants were consistently responsive, provided consent to participate, and were able to chisel time out of their schedules for the researcher to collect data.

Each participant was asked questions from the Interview Questions and Protocol (Appendix B). The interview questions and setting provided an opportunity for each interview to feel more like a conversation between the participant and the researcher. The initial interviews ranged between forty and fifty minutes and each follow-up interview

was between twelve and twenty minutes. The interview protocol allowed for thick rich descriptions as the participants shared their experiences. The use of six participants allowed me to obtain a breadth of data from the participants in the case study while gathering a depth of data from each individual subject.

### **Katie, Juris Doctor**

My first introduction to Dr. Katie was through social media. About a year ago, her campaign for District Judge began with a parade and distribution of eye-catching shirts. We were originally connected through Facebook when a mutual friend shared her campaign post. It was obvious she was an attorney, as the shirt included the name of her firm, and she was standing beside a bus stop where her law office was being advertised. Her Facebook page allowed me to investigate her background of where she attended high school. I realized we were also members of the same sorority and a high profile elected official within the community was also a common friend. After reaching out to our mutual friend and sorority sister, I immediately reached out to Dr. Katie. She responded affirmatively and was intrigued by the opportunity to participate in this study. Although she is extremely busy, she was able to make time for the interview.

On the day of the initial interview while driving to her office, she called to let me know her last meeting went long, but she was on her way. She pulled up in a mid-sized sports utility vehicle, jumped out with her purse and professional bag in hand. It was Saturday, and her black leggings and neon colored sports top were perfect for a workout or running errands.

I was greeted with an immediate smile from a sun-kissed brown woman who needs no make-up. She has natural hair, and she was above average height. Her presence

was evident but not overwhelming. While entering the code to the building, she was talking swiftly about the business of the day but also her excitement for the interview. After entering the professional office building, we continued on to the entrance of the reception area of her law office. She was talking the entire time, not sure if she took a breath, and then we entered her personal office space.

We were able to chat for a few minutes in the office as she got settled behind her distinct table-desk in her large leather chair and me in one of the two client chairs. Dr. Katie seemed anxious to get started. This was my first interview for the study, and I was nervous, as well. I asked the first question, “Would you tell me about yourself, your family, and the home in which you grew up in?” There was a short pause and Dr. Katie responded with a deep breath followed by, “Okay, Whoa!” Her non-verbal signs of relaxing back in her chair and the large smile turning to a serious face made me realize this was going to get deep very quickly.

Dr. Katie provided the following recollection of her home, her family, and the circumstances she grew up in:

I am the oldest of three girls. My parents were and are still married. Both my parents were drug addicts; my mother still is, but my father is clean and now a pastor. I always say, ‘We went from riches to rags,’ because our parents were who other people looked up to. They built a house from the ground up and we lived there. That was our home. My parents weren’t always drug addicts; I was about...maybe eleven, twelve, and you know, at first we were at home often by ourselves. Obviously, our literal lives were changing in small areas because at first you don’t lose your money...at first! You don’t lose your house, at first! It’s

the little things like you can't go out to eat anymore, there's no groceries at the house, or 'Where's the TV?'

Dr. Katie went on to resentfully describe not having utilities and eventually losing their home after having a life with two parents who had good jobs and nice cars, to moving in with her grandmother, "Who had to get on state assistance to take care of three children she hadn't planned to raise, after she raised her own eleven."

Dr. Katie took a moment to point to a photo on a large bookshelf behind the researcher; it's her grandmother who passed away in 2014. She recalled her grandmother sending the girls to live with their mom again a few times when she would get clean, "She saw us as her grounding effect because that was her daughter and she wanted her to get better; but if you know any addicts, we can't be her grounding effect. She must be her own grounding effect."

Dr. Katie described her internal desire to leave the home:

As the oldest sister, when I was about sixteen and living back in the home with my mother, I became quite vocal. It began to feel like two moms were in the house. I felt like I shouldn't have to be the mother, but I was having to be the mother to my younger sisters. It was her house, so I had to leave. I went to live with my mother's older sister, my aunt.

When asked about her educational journey from elementary through high school, Dr. Katie got excited again and the smile re-emerged. She could recall her timeline of schools from pre-school through high school. She says she is proud of being a member of the alumni, but says her mascot boastfully, she qualifies and defends the school and the district because she knows the perceptions out there about the school district but

especially the negativity surrounding her high school. “We felt as though the school district thought we were not really a part of the district and we were country and we don’t want nothing.”

She describes how she loved attending her schools. The remembrance of a foreign teacher of the Gifted & Talented Program brought a huge smile to her face, along with remembering being bused to a different school to receive these advanced services with other students in the district. “I thought that was the best thing ever! It made me feel important.”

The secondary experience after attending a 5<sup>th</sup> year center was even better for Dr. Katie. She enjoyed changing classes all day long and getting exposed to all the content areas and different teachers. While praising the teachers and schools she attended, she explained that she never felt like she was underprivileged. “I never felt like my teachers failed me. I realize that’s what people sometimes think and say about teachers.”

Dr. Katie knows that every teacher was not good, and begins to ask and answer these questions as she defends teachers and makes a case for her belief that the student should take responsibility for his or her own learning:

Was every teacher good? No probably not. Would I have known that at the time? I didn’t. As an adult, I know now that my 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher was on drugs, but that’s when we had the CAT Test (California Achievement Test). She literally slept through a CAT Test, but while I’m in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade I knew, ‘I’ve got to do this test.’ I wasn’t looking at her like... ‘you’re on drugs,’ because at that time, I knew nothing about drugs. But before she would go to sleep, she would set the

little timer for the test. I'd make sure I knew how much time was left and would use the timer to countdown to make sure I finished.

After telling this story of a drug addicted teacher passed out on the desk during the national assessment, Dr. Katie goes on to make her point, "I think the teachers should take responsibility, but you (the student) must take responsibility for you (yourself and your education). There are people placed in your life that are supposed to help you along the way, but they may or may not." She even makes a reference to something she learned at church, "You have to give account." She applied this lesson to the 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher and the CAT Test, "So my account is to me, and if I had failed myself... whose fault is that?"

Dr. Katie doesn't believe she was thinking about failing herself at about nine years old, "But somewhere in my core, I knew... 'I've got to do this no matter what's going on up there (the teacher's desk) in here (the unsupervised classroom);' I must do this!"

When asked, "What challenges did you face and how did you overcome those challenges?" Dr. Katie was now even more comfortable sharing her truth about her obstacles in her life along with those hurdles she had to climb to get to where she is today professionally and personally. She thoughtfully reflected and then responded by saying audibly but quietly, "Childhood until now?" This was helpful because that let me know how she heard the question and better prepared me for her response. She wanted me to know more about her story.

Certainly, it's a challenge having addict parents. Me and my sisters were at home by ourselves in the dark and we hadn't seen our parents in several days. There's

no electricity, but there's water so we bathe and we do everything before the sun goes down and we all go to bed...all of us in there together and we get up and go to school the next day and none of that is the wiser, because it's embarrassing. It's embarrassing to tell people that you don't know where your parents are; even now, people think it's not hard or it wasn't or couldn't have been so bad because look at us now.

Dr. Katie looks down, gently shakes her head from side to side and continues:

That doesn't mean it wasn't bad, but just thank God...that's what I say. Oh no, no, no, I don't discount what the experience was for me or even for others who are in the experience. When you discount the experience because you no longer remain in that experience, you don't encourage people that are in that experience to overcome the experience.

With strong conviction, eyebrows raised and leaning forward, now with both elbows on the desk and her hands clasped while making this point, Dr. Katie goes on to say:

That's my belief! If you tell someone it's okay, it's okay to be sorry because your parents are drug addicts, then they're sorry. You don't hide, that's not what you do; that's not what I've done. Instead, you overcome that because at some point there's a switch where you can't say, 'Well, because my parents are on drugs...'. What do I look like at 41 years old saying, 'But my parents are drug addicts.' That doesn't work in the real world. You have to get over yourself and get over it and get some therapy and go on about your business!

Dr. Katie gets more personal in sharing her daily struggle with issues from her past as she explains the challenge of allowing others in her life to make mistakes. She realizes she comes across as all business because of the responsibility she took on from her parents in order to mother her sisters.

This is part of my personality; I am super black and white and I've had to learn that there is grey in life, but that does not come naturally. It takes work for me. I struggle with being soft. A mistake is not unto death; it is not the end of the world. Mistakes are good; you learn from them. Mistakes are normal and people are human as am I and I should even let myself be human."

Being the oldest child and experiencing the addiction of her parents and understanding what that meant to her life has made it difficult for her to learn to live. "That's been the hardest thing to not always be on guard. Often saying to myself, 'I've got to be perfect; what do they mean to do to me?' It's hard, it's hard and it's an everyday situation." She recognizes it and knows that this is the way she has coped to get through life and wants to do something about it. She feels it interferes with her life and relationships.

As we approached the halfway point of the interview, I asked the following question, "What support factors helped to support you in your educational journey?" I fully anticipated she would go straight to her grandmother but instead she prefaced the response with this profound statement:

Even though we had a very large family, and my family would disagree with this statement, but we didn't have a very large support system. What people think is a support system is different than what is an actual support system. Because they

were on the outside and couldn't determine what I on the inside needed as a support system. It's difficult for people to accept because they think you're ungrateful.

Dr. Katie became relaxed in her jargon as she began to tell me a story about one of her aunts buying her ice-cream, probably feeling like she was helping, but she and her sisters hadn't eaten in three meals.

I didn't need ice-cream; I didn't have no meat! I didn't say that, and accepted the ice-cream at twelve, but it's embarrassing; it's embarrassing for your parents to be on drugs and you don't have electricity and the microwave is gone, so even if you have hot pockets that have thawed out, you can't cook the hot pockets. That is a literal story of my life.

She again shakes her head reminiscing on this painful experience but then collects her thoughts again, takes a deep breath and begins to share who, what, and where her support came from. Now she begins to describe the woman, her grandmother who was on the picture behind me.

So, my grandmother was not an educated woman. I think she stopped school in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. She was born in 1920 and honey was proud about being able to pick her a whole bag of cotton. So, I was like, 'You were still picking cotton?' You would think she wouldn't know much about education, but what she knew was that she didn't have one. That's how she saw the world; you needed one.

Dr. Katie began to quote her beloved grandmother with what were likely the gestures and mannerisms of her.

"You gonna get your schooling."

Laughing, Dr. Katie said, “That’s what she’d call it, schooling.”

“You gone get your learning and you gone go to school.”

“You go to school every day and you betta get good grades.”

“I’m not buying school shoes and stuff for you to go and get F’s.”

Dr. Katie recalls school being her job as a child but also remembers having additional responsibilities when she got off the school bus. Although the school district is considered urban and inner city, the school was located on the far eastside of the city.

“We had jobs when we got home. We had horses, chickens, ducks, geese, rabbits, dogs,”

Dr. Katie says laughing.

She smiles again saying, “She was so proud. We were in the band, we didn’t miss out. That’s probably why people think we didn’t suffer because we didn’t miss out on much as it related to extracurricular activities. All three of us were cheerleaders and all three of us were in the band.”

When asked about motivation to go to college and educational goals, Dr. Katie set for herself, she quickly responded with assertion, “I never thought I had a choice to go to college. I knew I was going.”

She knew education was her escape. She excelled and considers herself an academic.

I’m getting out of here! I meant the whole state. I lived with my aunt when I was at the end of my high school career and she took me to a HBCU in Georgia, for a college visit. There was a scholarship there, a scholarship program, so we went and visited. I accepted and that is where I went to college.

Dr. Katie apologized for what she shared with me next, as she didn't want to run the risk of sounding arrogant:

School is what I do. This is almost embarrassing but I don't give 100% to anything academic; this stuff comes to me easy." She continues with evidence, "I have 3 degrees and none of them taxed me; now, I did fail a class in college."

Laughing she says, "I failed Advanced Accounting. I didn't know attendance was going to be included in my grade. I was a math major and could do anything they had in my sleep, come on! They taught me a lesson and I had to graduate in the summer."

My degree was a dual degree program for my scholarship and I was to do a math degree in three years at the university and then two years at UNLV, (University of Nevada Las Vegas) for an electrical engineering degree. I did an internship in Nevada and didn't like Nevada or anything it had to offer, so I decided I wasn't going to school there, but didn't want to lose my scholarship. I acted like I was going until the 4<sup>th</sup> year and then transferred to the Accounting Department to get out real easy with a degree.

It wasn't necessary to ask the question, "What motivated you to get an advanced degree?" Dr. Katie's story of how she got to Georgia and back to her home state more than answers the question.

After graduating with a bachelor's degree, she lived in Atlanta, had a job, roommates and a boyfriend, but missed her family. She said, "I was mildly depressed. I look at pictures of myself and I was skinny, puny and I'm not meant to be skinny." Her

parents were not on drugs then, so she called her daddy and said, “Daddy, I’m ready to come home.” He came and loaded up what could be loaded in their cars, and she left.

I was grateful they were in a position to say, ‘Come home,’ but now home was Kansas City and that is not where I stayed. I was only there a couple months and then said, ‘No, I’m ready to go home.’ So I came back here and I’ve been here ever since.

I was working as an accountant for a large national company and was bored; I really didn’t have interest in this. So one day I decided to go to grad school. I went during lunch and visited with an admissions officer, filled out the application and they called to tell me I was accepted and that I needed to come enroll. The MBA program was accelerated with 9 weeks on and one week off, and again I found myself bored.

Dr. Katie remembers saying to herself, “Lord, I should have chosen something else. But I don’t quit things; you know what I mean...once I start off...even a book...even if I hate it, I can’t not finish it.” She then whispers, “Issues,” and begins laughing at herself. She then continues to take me along her educational journey to Attorney Katie. She describes being in the master’s program and taking Business Law as part of her coursework. Her professor was a practicing attorney and she thought, “I can do that.” She began to investigate her options and discovered there was a dual program to earn an MBA and a JD. The program required both, and since Dr. Katie is a self-proclaimed achievement type of person, she again said to herself, “Let me finish this so that I can graduate and then I’ll feel like I did something and then go on to Law School. That’s what I did, and I don’t regret it. This is by far the most rewarding career path I’ve had or even job.

While in law school, Dr. Katie took a position as an adjunct professor at a small local religious college. She thought she could teach part-time and go to Law School, but it became more difficult than anticipated.

I thought the freedom of time would make it easier, but when you really are a teacher at heart, when you're teaching, you prepare. So the fact that you are only teaching so many hours a day does not mean that's the only time you're working. Education is just what I do. It's easy for me and I enjoyed it until law school.

Dr. Katie begins to laugh but is serious when she says:

You don't ever have to worry about me going to school again; it cured me.

Really, it wasn't law school that killed me, but it was bar preparation because it was super taxing. But other than my grandmother having the expectation, it's just something that comes easy for me and I enjoy it. I never felt like I had to, because you don't need three degrees. I don't use all three of them...I don't think, but they're on the wall.

When asked about adjustments or obstacles encountered in college and how she overcame them, she said, "I didn't know how to study. I didn't need to know how to study until Law School. It was hard for me because nothing prior to the Bar required as much of me, ever, ever."

She begins to describe how much content you have to know for the Bar Exam and how there is no way that a student can take all the courses in three years and then the discovery of her learning style emerged during the interview.

I would go to BARBRI (Bar review preparation course) every single day, all day long and I would come home and make little notecards, because I'm a visual or I

don't know what to call it, but when I write something down I can recall it and visualize exactly what that card looked like with my handwriting on it. So, no joke, even during the Bar Exam, I could see my notecard on that subject. So, I would literally, even though most of the people would take notes on their laptops, and I would too, but during Bar Prep I would handwrite because I don't remember typing things. For instance, I can type and talk, but when I handwrite something, it sticks. So basically, I had to learn to study. That was a big obstacle for me.

Dr. Katie tells me to ask the question again to make sure she has thoroughly answered it.

After I do, she again allows me to peer into her personal struggle. She says:

Interpersonal relationships is broad but I'm still overcoming it. It's difficult to interact normally or functionally when you've been raised in dysfunction.

Growing up and me wanting to escape by going to Georgia, in my mind; I was like, 'Nobody there knows me. They don't know my mama; they don't know my story. I can be whoever I want to be.'

Dr. Katie decided she would develop her personality that had previously been repressed when she was going back and forth from being a mother figure to a child in her home. Now let me say, "Some parts of my personality overdeveloped, and I had to nip that in the bud. When I got there...."

Dr. Katie's thought process was interrupted and she then tells me about how her family always thought she had a smart mouth, and recalls often being hit in the mouth by one of her aunts.

She'd hit me in the mouth, and I'd say, 'Why did you do that?'

She'd then say, 'Because you gone say something.'

‘Gone say something? But I haven’t said anything.’

So, I felt repressed. That’s my word now, and I think it’s an accurate description; meaning, there were things I wanted to say but wouldn’t have said as a kid because I’d get popped in the mouth or because they were adults and you need to stay out of grown folks’ business. But when you’re a smart child and you’re able to process just as well as the adult in the next room what you’re hearing, but you can’t help them through...and what they’re saying is stupid because you’re a kid. So, I think I felt repressed and like people ran over me all the time.

Dr. Katie saw herself as a pleaser who tried not to do anything to cause people to talk poorly about her and her situation, “My parents were on drugs and I didn’t want people talking about me.” She then describes how being a pleaser didn’t protect her from this negative talk about her parents, even though she internalized the remarks about her parents as being directed at her. With attitude and likely exactly how her adolescent cousins would harshly say, she mimics them, “Your mama’s on crack!” She recalls the comments angrily because they were true. Dr. Katie then almost childlike and the first time I saw her as vulnerable says, “You think, ‘Why would you say that, my mama is on crack; what do you say to that?’”

Suddenly, her fierce personality represents itself again with full force and her next comments demonstrate her smart mouth her aunt must have known existed,

So, you develop tough skin or you develop a rebuttal...(with a mischievous grin) or you go to school and become a lawyer and they become thieves. This is the truth, and even before I was a lawyer, ‘Well, that’s why I’m doing this and you’re

doing that, and my mama was on crack. Maybe your mama should have been on crack and you would have been better.

Dr. Katie knows it's not nice and uses this as an example of how hard she has had to work on her interpersonal skills. She confesses, "When I got to Georgia, I decided I wasn't going to let people run over me anymore and I snapped back (snapping her fingers twice) all the time."

She goes on to explain how she didn't want to be that way as she realized how her past experiences helped to develop this, "bristly" personality. "You're bristly, like thorns on a rose bush...you're cute, you're a cheerleader, you've got a boyfriend...but you're crazy a little bit (laughing)!" Dr. Katie realizes it's a learning process she works on every day to reign that unflattering attitude back in, "But honestly, it's a work, you're a work in progress and I think that's an obstacle that I have to overcome and I am still overcoming in my personal life. I think it's going to be the biggest thing for the rest of my life."

When asked about the motivation to obtain advanced degrees, Dr. Katie responds nonchalantly, "Well, I was bored and that's the truth." She talked to me more about her habit of attending school when she's bored to be challenged, but then added, "I was working in corporate America and corporate America is driven by degrees."

She was working for a major national communications company as a Financial Analyst I and the company would post open positions. Dr. Katie remembers there being a Financial Analyst III position posted which required a Master's degree. At that time she was already in a Master's program. The jobs had been coming through the e-mail and being posted and when she was just a few weeks from graduating and she applied for

the position. She was interviewed right before her graduation date and remembers what the supervisor said, “But you don’t have a master’s degree.”

Dr. Katie recreates the awkward scenario, “Come again? Seriously?”

The supervisor then said, “I really think you should consider being a Financial Analyst II and approaching III, because...”

Dr. Katie has an offended look on her face when she describes what happened next:

And we ended up having what I would call a spiritual conversation. What I told her was, ‘You do not determine the path of my life and I won't stay here if you think that you are because I can skip II and get to III because I am capable of being that. And if your goal is to limit me and to structure me into the way you think it should go then that means I can't be here with you.’

Dr. Katie quit, not that day, but she secured another position and quit. When she quit, she made sure the supervisor who created a “glass ceiling” for her understood that she was moving to a position with a salary increase more than the Financial Analyst III would have given her.

After telling this memory, she adds with satisfaction, “I believe that every step before today got me to today; and so, I’m okay with it.”

When asked to describe herself as an individual and then as a student she said, “As an individual, a work in progress (laughing). As an individual, I am probably more serious than not, more intense than not, but I’m still fun. I like to have fun, lighthearted but appropriate fun. I’m pretty easy going. I don’t like to be used or abused.”

Being raised by her grandmother with chores after school to help care for animals, she describes herself more, “I’m a country girl; I love animals. I have three horses and two dogs.”

Dr. Katie’s thoughts take a turn, “I like people who are self-sufficient. I can give anything but you can’t ask me for it. Let me give willingly, and I do. I’ll give my time, my money.” She then tells me about her husband who she adores and doesn’t know how he puts up with her telling her how good she is with her animals and her nieces and nephews. Dr. Katie demonstrates how she has worked through her childhood circumstances and how her personality has developed saying,

Honestly, I think my animals and nieces and nephews are my surrogates for my childhood. They appreciate you and they can accept what you are doing but they can’t do for themselves. I think part is because I couldn’t do for myself and how I was treated, or they deserve it. They (my nieces and nephews) are my pride and joy.

Dr. Katie, without being prompted, transitions into describing herself as “not a very good student” although she doesn’t think her teachers would agree. She didn’t have to study until she was in law school. Throughout her Pre-K-12 educational experience she remembers always completing her work before everyone else and reading books to fill the time.

Dr. Katie is asked to define success and then tell about successes she’s experienced, “Wow, that’s a good question.” She then continues to ponder the question. It’s the first time she hesitates during the interview. She prefaces her response by clarifying she knows the definition today is different than it would have been five or ten

years ago. “I used to think success was about money, achievements, and stuff. My perspective changed; success for me now is happiness... internal happiness, like making decisions that I can feel comfortable with. Impacting the lives of others, literally, is success.”

Dr. Katie has a satisfying smile and tells me a few stories as evidence of her success. She was the keynote speaker at a graduation and after the graduation she was contacted by a parent of a graduate who happened to be a former classmate. The parent was in the audience and took time to let her know she appreciated the message shared and praised her for her accomplishments and reaching the goals she set as an example of what potential can become.

Dr. Katie appreciates the little things like being recognized in the grocery store or other random places in the community by students from her alma mater or the Boys and Girls Club where she has spoken to the young people about goals, their future, and career options. The joy she receives from these comments is clear in her words, “You can’t solicit those types of things; you can’t create those types of experiences. I want my life to be a legacy. While I’m alive, I want to create the next person that is me and beyond.”

She goes on to say, “So now, success is very different for me, and you know, I don’t discount the fact that I don’t need anything. I live well, and I enjoy the way I live; but it doesn’t define me. I’ve bought and lost a house and so stuff doesn’t matter to me anymore.”

### **Stanley, Doctor of Philosophy**

Dr. Stanley is an avid Facebook user. We became Facebook friends because we have a few commonalities that include living within the same community, we are both

educators with opinions, and our children attend the same high school. He is transparent and showcases his family, his beliefs about education, and has become a master at real estate marketing. His profile doubles as a resume and from the information on his page, he became a possible participant in this study of African American outliers. I had never met him in person, until 2017, when I sent an enthusiastic direct message to make sure he qualified for the study by meeting all four of the criteria. He replied affirmatively and sent his e-mail address so he could receive the approved E-mail Invitation to Participate in Study (Appendix E).

The busy Dr. Stanley squeezed me into one of his house-showing summer Saturday's. We met in a large conference room at his well-known highly successful realty office. I began to explain that, it was this very same room that I completed paperwork to get pre-qualified for my loan. It appeared he had very little time for informal conversation as he shook my hand with a very serious expression on his face. I thanked him for making time for this important study and began the interview.

My instincts of feeling rushed were confirmed after asking the first question. When he was asked to describe himself, his family and the home he grew up in, he had a swift response, "I'm a professor of political science at a local community college and I also teach as an adjunct professor at another major university. I am starting my sixteenth year of teaching. Is that all you need to know?"

I was worried my insider track was not beneficial, today. I smiled and reworded the question, "It's up to you Dr. Stanley, but I'd like to know more about your family and the home you grew up in. Would you like to share that with me?"

His face relaxed realizing he had not answered my question, “Oh, my family and how I grew up.” He sat back in his chair and placed his elbows on the arms of the chair and created a diamond with his fingertips. I could then see he was ready, ready to take me to a place he hadn’t been in a while, and I was ready to journey with him.

Dr. Stanley began to describe the eastside of town with familiar streets, intersections, and bordering neighborhoods. I knew exactly where he was talking about and could envision the home in my mind. The home was in a rough area with a large, low-income housing project apartment building directly across the street. The complex was drug infested with known crack houses and prostitutes according to Dr. Stanley. He recalls the transition from that type of activity escalating to, “...gang violence, drive-by’s, multiple shootings, and seeing dead people in yards and fields.”

He then describes how rough it was to grow up there as a young boy, “It was a lot to take in, and it was a very eye-opening experience.” The well-dressed man sitting across from me closes his eyes briefly and says, “Half, more than half of my friends and family members are either dead or incarcerated due to growing up in the same environment and neighborhoods I grew up in.”

Dr. Stanley then thinks of his parents, “My parents were working two and sometimes three jobs, God bless them.” He spoke of their goal to work hard and save money to move him and his younger sister out of the neighborhood. Parents working multiple jobs meant he was a latchkey kid without supervision and he found himself hanging with neighborhood friends who were also gang members. He was doing things he shouldn’t have been doing but excused it as, “...just part of the culture and environment.”

The professor made a joke in reminding me of his age when asked to share his educational experience from childhood, “You know I’m 46 years old.” He could recall the names of the schools he attended, but he was clear in sharing he was always in Gifted and Talented Classes. He excelled in both math and science because he enjoyed them, but made B’s and C’s in the other classes in which he demonstrated less interest.

Dr. Stanley feels as though the public school district he attended failed him. He qualified this statement,

When I say they failed me, I mean I had some great teachers who were mentors and role models and pushed me, but the system itself...I felt like, failed me because they did not prepare me for the transition to the expectations of a 4-year institution. My writing levels, my reading levels, I just felt lost and that’s what contributed to me dropping out the first semester of college.

This statement led to the next inquiry about the challenges he faced. Dr. Stanley acknowledged a lack a finances and growing up impoverished as the most difficult challenge he had to overcome. He intimately began to tell me a Christmas story that he prefaced by saying,

I don’t even know if I told my parents this, but I remember one Christmas my parents, not really arguing or fighting, but I could hear them in the other room talking about which bills they weren’t going to pay in order for us to have something for Christmas.

This was a memory that impacted Dr. Stanley because his parents worked hard and sacrificed for the family. He said, “There was a time we had to actually live with our cousins who lived two or three houses down from our house. It was a two bedroom 800

square foot home, and there were nine of us living there.” He remembers even with the financial challenges, they didn’t have luxuries, “At the end of the day, my parents always made sure that we were taken care of whether it was having enough food, clothes, or whatever the case may be.”

Dr. Stanley’s parents were finally able to save enough money to move from the eastside to the southside, before his senior year of high school. They thought it was the best thing, “I hated it; I hated it! I faced racism, more racism, more derogatory statements because we were the minorities there.” During the interview he repeats a few more times how much he hated living and attending school there. He was upset with his parents and missed the familiarity of the eastside where he was comfortable and felt included. It wasn’t an easy year, but he graduated.

Dr. Stanley identified several people who made up his support system. He gives much credit to his mother who encouraged him to get an education and reach high. She valued math and science and knew they would benefit him. She was not only his support, but motivated him in his educational goals. He recalls disappointing her when he dropped out of college, “As a mama’s boy, to see the disappointment on her face, I felt really bad.”

Dr. Stanley became a father at just 20 years old and after being a college dropout and working odd jobs, he knew it would not be enough to support his family. He is a proud father to his daughter and says she was a part of his support system because she motivated him to want more and do more. His wife has also been a valued encourager in his life for the last thirteen years. He then thoughtfully says, “Friends and mentors have

been extremely supportive throughout the years; even today my friends are my former professors.”

Since he used the word, “mentor,” I asked that he clarify and provide his definition of what a mentor is to him; Dr. Stanley without hesitation replied:

A mentor is someone that’s okay with taking on the responsibility of helping to aid or assist in making someone else a better human being. To me, that’s a mentor; someone who says, ‘I’m going to take you under my wing and I’m going to make sure I provide you with the best advice based on my experiences, and hopefully my advice makes you a better human being.’

While sharing why he pursued advanced degrees, Dr. Stanley sighed, “It was always...” He paused and interrupted that thought to preface what he would say next, “I’ve got to choose my words carefully here. I’ve always been the type that...if I’m going to do something, I’m going to achieve the highest. I don’t care what it is.”

He starts to discuss his job as a dishwasher when he was sixteen, and he proudly says, “I’m going to be the best damn dishwasher and I’m going to work my way up to manager or whatever.”

Using this example, Dr. Stanley, described how he approaches education. “Well, if I’m going to do this (education), I’m going to take it all the way. It was a motivating factor, but I knew that if I ever wanted to teach beyond and be a tenured professor at a 4-year institution or if I ever wanted to get into any type of leadership position; a PhD was going to help me. If a PhD is at the top and that’s the highest that you can achieve, then that’s what I’m going to do.

At this point in the interview, as I am getting to know the participant, I could likely answer the next question, but in the spirit of removing myself so the voice of the participant is heard, each question is asked. There is no place for assumptions, so I ask about him as an individual and as a student.

When asked how he would describe himself as an individual, Dr. Stanley diverts to what his family and friends would likely say about him as an individual. “They’d say, ‘I’m very caring; I’m very giving, and I’m very honest. You may not want to hear it, but if you come to me and you want my honest opinion, you’re going to get honesty from me.” He then asked me to repeat the question. I’m glad I asked, because I was expecting a different response.

Then, quietly to himself while thinking, he repeated the three adjectives above and continued, “Inspiring!” He tells me about the numerous students who tell him he inspires them. When answering the question, he’s talking to himself in reflection and confirms with me in the end, “Very driven, motivated, and accountable...I mean all of these attributes apply to me as an individual and as a student.”

Dr. Stanley has been identified for this study as successful because of his accomplishments, but when asked how he defines success, his response had nothing to do with his accolades. He first complemented the researcher by repeating the question and adding, “That’s a good question, because for me, success is not about monetary or financial. Success for me is family.” He further describes his definition with a family having ups and downs, but ultimately being, “a cohesive unit, all on the same page, having the same goals, and caring about one another.”

The professor goes on to reiterate success not being financial or monetary “stuff” and those things being much further down the line. He then includes his students in his definition of success. “Success for me is the impact that I have on my students. Inspiring them. That’s the one reason why I’m still at the community college.”

With his advanced degrees, he could write his own ticket and teach on so many other levels, but he passionately share with me what he says to his students, “Like you as community college students, I’ve been in your shoes; I know what it means to work full-time or at least part-time while taking care of children, while having to juggle school and the world of academia...and still be successful.”

Dr. Stanley offers advice to educators who work with high risk students by telling them what not to do. While wagging his finger he says, “Don’t preach to these kids!” He advises against telling them what they are doing is wrong or bad, but “...instead explain to them that there are better options, better paths.” He talks about the feedback he’s received from at risk youth who describe pastors, counselors, teachers, and business people who have the opportunity to address these young people. “They don’t listen to them. They tune them out because they can’t relate to them.”

Dr. Stanley who has worked with at risk youth for over twenty years describes how he approaches these impressionable young people who are participating in high risk behaviors. While sitting at the conference table, he re-enacts his message to a group of students. On this hot summer day were we have had several days of temperatures reaching the upper nineties, he’s dressed in a long sleeve designer dress shirt. Dr. Stanley sits erect in the wingback chair to tell me this story.

When given the task to inspire forty students who were identified as at risk he entered into the room in a suit and tie with the students already rolling their eyes. He goes on to retell what they were probably thinking, “Oh, man, another suit and tie guy coming here to preach to us.” His teacher skills are being demonstrated before my eyes as he sets this up. He formally describes how he approached the lectern and introduced himself with his academic background, degrees, honors, awards, and publications, “I mean, I’m throwing it at them (laughing)!”

Dr. Stanley knows the kids are already starting to tune him out and thinking, “Seriously, this guy is really full of himself.” He describes his attire as a suit and tie, but he has a short sleeve shirt underneath the jacket. As the motivational speech has just begun and the students have just about checked out, he takes his suit coat off and the students can see his tatted arms. While talking to me, he unbuttons his long sleeve shirt and begins to fold them up so that I can see the gang tattoos he’s accumulated. I can visualize exactly how the students felt at that moment as I too was experiencing it in this very moment. His arms are covered. The ones that jump out say, “Eastside” and “Never Forget Where You Came From.”

Once they’re mesmerized by my tattoos and they’re paying attention and locked in, I say, “Now would you like to hear my story?” So, that’s a piece of advice I would give to teachers...don’t preach to these kids. Try to put yourself in their position, try to understand, and try to be more sympathetic to these kids.

When providing advice to parents, he encourages them to, “...get more involved, try to motivate them to want more and to accomplish more than they have as parents.” He doesn’t want to appear judgmental and says, “It doesn’t apply to all parents.” He is

targeting parents of certain kinds of kids and I know because he goes on to say, “When I think of at risk kids, I think of kids who are growing up in poverty, who are at risk to violence and incarceration.”

Dr. Stanley and his wife are both educators and she serves as a teacher in the very school district focused on in this study. He’s upset that parents of these students don’t show up for parent teacher conferences. Dr. Stanley believes the parents have to buy into a culture of parents as motivators wanting more for their children so that students in turn want more for themselves, more than the parents could provide for them. He calls that being his motivation, “My parents wanted more for me and said it and demonstrated it in their actions. They were hard on me academically. For them, that was the way out of poverty, through education.”

### **Sonny, Doctor of Philosophy**

Dr. Sonny is a high school teacher and coach. He has been an educator for fifteen years in the focus school district of this study. The researcher affectionately calls him “Coach” and “Brother.” Dr. Sonny has worked alongside the researcher’s husband as a coach of multiple sports and spent many Tuesday and Friday evenings together supporting the students where 100% qualify for the Federal Lunch Program in the heart of “The Hood.” Additionally, Dr. Sonny attends the same congregation for worship as the researcher on Sunday morning and Wednesday evening.

I met Dr. Sonny at a metropolitan library near his home. He arrived before I arrived as he was searching for classroom resources to integrate into his classroom to make learning more relevant for his students. This year, the administration added a

section of Financial Literacy, a course he's never taught, to his schedule. He met me in the private room with a stack of DVD's and books in his hands.

It was Saturday afternoon, and he was wearing athletic attire, loose fitting pants, a zip up matching jacket, and a shirt underneath with his school name and mascot on the front. Dr. Sonny is a distinguished man with a noticeable presence. He not only played college football, but went on to play in the National Football League, and many years later he remains in excellent physical condition. He looks like an ex-professional athlete. He pushes the glass door of the conference room open and his soft but raspy voice greets me through his salt and pepper beard with, "Well hello, future Dr. Perry."

Dr. Sonny smiles with a little laugh, three identical chuckles evenly spaced apart, and he begins to tell me why he has the DVD's and books in his hands. He asks about the family and we catch up a bit and then we are ready to begin the interview.

Dr. Sonny does not hold back and opens up about his young and difficult life. He is the oldest of four children. His mother was only thirteen when she gave birth to him and he sadly says, "She left us, abandoned us." This towering man with a big presence is childlike when he made the statement and continued down this painful path to being six or seven when she left.

Dr. Sonny grew up in foster homes, group homes and eventually landed with his grandmother and grandfather on the eastside of town, where there has now been re-gentrification and people pay half a million to a million or more to live in what they now call Deep Deuce. "We went from home to home but my grandmother was always involved, always there with us." He then proudly shares he is a "product of the school system" for this study.

This led us to the next question regarding his educational journey. Dr. Sonny goes beyond high school and includes his college education in this question as a natural extension. He calls out the name of each school attended from elementary all the way through his Ph.D. He says, “Elementary was fun!” Dr. Sonny describes himself as, “musically inclined...I loved music because of my teacher from middle school.” He was also a gifted athlete and had numerous college scholarship offers from Division I programs and accepted the offer at the University of Missouri.

It’s apparent Dr. Sonny has shared his educational and athletic successes many times before, not bragging, but matter of fact, “I went on to play in the National Football League (NFL).” When his football career ended he returned to his home state and took courses at the Historically Black College about forty minutes from the city to earn his Master’s degree. Dr. Sonny now holds a Ph.D. in the specialty area of Pain Management.

When asked about challenges he faced, he admits he was a struggling reader. “I didn’t comprehend, but I had a good teacher who called my grandmother.” She offered to tutor him. Dr. Sonny goes on to say, “Academically, I had some very good teachers that would help me.” That was a struggle he faced but knew his teachers helped him to overcome it.

Dr. Sonny admits, he continued to struggle with the relationship with his mother. When she was in trouble, he was tasked with going to pick her up. He said, “I knew she was my mom but she was more like a sister to me, but not a big sister.” Her abandonment had always bothered him and since he had her attention in the car with him for about ninety minutes in the front seat, he asked her, “Why did you leave us?” He tells her of the times he and his siblings were going from home to home and the abuse they

suffered verbally from some of the foster parents. He breaks down and has to collect his emotions and he silently cries with tears streaming down his face he says, “My brother took so much physical abuse from one of my uncles.”

The researcher offers a break to Dr. Sonny; he refused shaking his head and says, “No, I want to continue. I just didn’t know this would be stirred up.” I brought a travel pack of Kleenex and pulled it from my bag and he smiles, “You came prepared.” After a few moments, he continues to reveal some painful memories of his childhood. He details being awakened in the middle of the night because his brother had wet the bed. He describes his brother as a toddler being beaten by a really big man, “while he made me and my sister sit in the corner watching.” Dr. Sonny begins to cry shaking his head while sniffing says, “I thought he was dead. He was bleeding from his mouth and nose.” His tears become belligerent when he angrily tells the researcher how he wanted to grow up and hurt his uncle one day.

Dr. Sonny cracks a grin, “I thought he was a big strong black man with ripped muscles, but when I grew up and later returned to confront him...he was a little man. He was all of 5’6.” As an adult he realized his uncle had a problem, and he decided not to waste his time hurting him or even confronting him about the abuse. He remembers this was his aunt’s husband, and during this time, his aunt was “going through some stuff, so I left it alone.”

It’s as if Dr. Sonny is on a sofa and I am the therapist because he doesn’t stop, but continues sharing his childhood struggles. I just listened, never taking my eyes off him. This is the first time he mentions his absentee father who lived down the street from his grandmother, “He’d tell me he’d pick me up. He’d always promise me...I’d get my bag

ready to go, but I never spent the night with him.” Dr. Sonny straightens himself up in the chair as if he realized his poor posture and with authority affirms, “It was good, it was a good thing because he made me a stronger father. I knew how it felt and I didn’t want my kids to experience that, so when I would promise my kids something, I would always do it.”

Dr. Sonny circles back to his mother, “I shared my pain with my mom and asked her again, ‘Why did you do what you did to us? Why did you leave us?’” She responded with one sentence, “I was too young and didn’t know how to be a mother.” Dr. Sonny just needed an answer and that was good enough for him. He said, “After sharing with her, I just left it alone. It was that simple.”

When asked about support factors, Dr. Sonny lists his grandmother, children, siblings, teammates, teachers, professors, and his church family including his minister. He says he had an uncle who served as a mentor for him. He looked up to him because he was an athlete, special education teacher and had gone on to earn a Ph.D. “My uncle motivated me to get my Bachelor’s. He said, ‘Exercise your right to vote; exercise everything because people died for us.’” He remembers him being a father figure who picked him up on the weekends, took him to the library and expected him to have the books read by the following weekend. He worked at the University of Oklahoma and took the future Division I athlete to college games, and the future Dr. Sonny to the campus library. “I wanted to make him proud, so he motivated me to get my first degree.”

At times during the interview, I thought he had a copy of the questions since his response to one would answer other questions the researcher prepared. He hadn’t yet

shared why or the motivation for his pursuit of advanced degrees, so he was asked directly.

Being a teacher, sitting in front of students and always talking about education and how important it is to get an education, so I pursued more degrees. While in my Master's program, I remember the professor asking students to raise their hands if they were going to get a Ph.D. and I sat on my hands. I was being worked so hard, I really didn't think I would get a Ph.D., but here I am, Dr. Sonny.

Dr. Sonny describes his definition of success by telling me what it is not. He assumes because he was a Division I athlete and played in the NFL, that is what I and others would think he'd say, "It's not making it as an athlete. I think success for me is being a parent and being a positive role model for my own children, students and players. When children come back and say, 'thank you, I appreciate what you have done for me.'"

Dr. Sonny shares his faith when discussing his view of success, "The most important thing for me is being a Christian, knowing where my success will be when I leave this planet, life after this; I'm Heaven bound. That's my ultimate Super Bowl." After making his point, he tells a story he remembers being a young man and answering the door, "Jehovah's Witnesses knocked on the door and asked me, 'Are you going to Heaven?'" He remembers he wasn't able to answer that question and feeling uncertain, "But if I'm asked that question, now, I can say, 'Yes, I'm assured! I'm going to Heaven!'"

Dr. Sonny describes himself as,

A free-heart...a free-spirit. I'm a student of Christianity. I believe that I'm the kind of person that is glad that I get an opportunity every day to wake up and try

to do it better. As a student, I am constantly wanting to learn. I'm never satisfied even in the sports I coach and the content I teach.

Simultaneously placing his left hand on the stack of resources and pointing toward them with his right; he says, "That's why I have these DVD's and books. I want to be prepared for my students; I want to learn a new or different way."

### **Cheryl, Juris Doctor**

Dr. Cheryl and I are members of the same historically black sorority and graduate chapter. We see each other at least once a month at sorority meetings and sometimes at additional engagements and outreach events hosted by the sorority during the year. She's a tall woman with long black hair gently pushed behind one ear, who wears only a hint of make-up and a sincere smile on her face. I've known Dr. Cheryl for many years, but didn't realize she had a J.D. Needing an additional participant to reach the goal of six total participants, I stood during a sorority meeting telling the sea of beautiful African American women, draped in pink and green attire, about the research, requirements, and need for additional participants, and immediately following the adjournment of the meeting, Dr. Cheryl was one of many who approached me. She clarified the criteria and said, "I qualify, and I would love to do it."

The following Saturday, we made arrangements to meet at the metropolitan library near her home in the affluent suburb north of the inner city where she grew up. I waited in the reserved private study room and sent her a text letting her know I was there and where she could find me. She assured me she would be in shortly, but she was wrapping up a business call while sitting in the parking lot of the library. About 5 minutes later, I could see her through the glass walls and door of the room, walking

swiftly in the library. I exited so that she could see me wave my hand. With relief, she smiled and approached me. We hugged greeting one another and entered the study room together. Dr. Cheryl was proudly wearing a pink and green sorority shirt and jeans. She apologized for her tardiness and then looked around the room and said, "I didn't even know this space was back here." Catching her breath from rushing in to meet me, I let her know that it was fine because I didn't have anything planned immediately following the protected time for her and I would not take too much of her Saturday.

Dr. Cheryl began to tell her fact filled story as if she were taking me on a timeline of her life with brief stopping points along the way but without many details. She was raised by a single mother and is the youngest of three children, an older brother and sister, on the eastside of the city. Dr. Cheryl briefly mentioned the name of her elementary and middle school, and then her high school and graduating class of 1984. She is more detailed and shares the accomplishment of graduating a year early. She explains that many of the educators during that time encouraged students to graduate early if they had the credits, so she pursued it to graduate with her boyfriend who is now her husband of 28 years. Remembering his negative comment, "You can't do that," Dr. Cheryl recalls making a believer out of him. She slightly raises her eyebrows and says with conviction, "I am going to show you, and I can because I have the credits."

Dr. Cheryl continued saying, "I have always been an "A" student. I was in the Gifted and Talented Program. I was in the top ten percent of my class and maintained a 3.8-4.0 throughout school (Pre-K-12)." She goes on to say, "I graduated with a 3.56 from college. I have always been studious." Dr. Cheryl provides an example of pledging the sorority and having the responsibility of being the resident advisor on campus. Since she

had her own dorm room, she would set her alarm and get up at 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning and complete work for class and study for her courses so that she would not have to worry about it for the remainder of the day. "I like to be prepared and organized. I don't like surprises. I've always been that kind of student and I still am that way, today."

When asked about challenges faced growing up, Dr. Cheryl began sharing the fact that neither of her older siblings attended college. Her brother worked and her sister was married early and had four children. Her most significant challenge involved her sister. She looks up at the ceiling briefly and says:

I remember being in high school and both (older sister and brother) had already moved out of the house, and then my sister came back to the house telling my mom she was pregnant with her fourth child and she and her husband were getting a divorce. I was angry. I was pissed off!

She'd finally gotten the house to herself and now she was coming back. Dr. Cheryl couldn't believe it. "I guess I was selfish." She laughs, "I have two really good friends who tease me even to this day about that because I literally started crying. I cried because my sister was moving back home."

Dr. Cheryl talks to me about her mom not having money all the time, then says, "...but I can honestly say, I never felt I was in need of anything." She begins to tell me more about her mom who was an LPN working the graveyard shift but made sure they (she and her siblings) had all they needed. When they are with their mom now, they praise her for doing such a good job with them. "She'd get off work and take us to school. Back then Jordache and Calvin Klein were popular but expensive for her to buy, but she made sure we had it. She didn't want us to feel different."

Dr. Cheryl was answering many of the interview questions changing the order so I took this as the opportunity to ask about the support she received throughout her educational journey. Without hesitation she said, “I had a lot of support!”

When I went off to college at a prominent, predominately White university, I never felt like I was on a white campus because there was a man who was a graduate from my high school, and was one of my mother’s friends she grew up with, who was over Black Student Services.

Dr. Cheryl realizes how much support he provided not only to her but also to other Black students on campus while she shared with me how he helped to create a strong subculture on campus filled with traditions and support. He also integrated the students into the predominately White university. He caused the students to feel connected to one another and to the college.

Dr. Cheryl affectionately remembered two high school teachers, both women of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated, talking about college and the expectations of college, all the time. She also had a cousin who lived in California who was the first cousin to attend college. When all the cousins were together, she’d have them thinking about college and discussing their future plans with one another. She’d ask, “Now what school are you going to? What do you think you want to be?”

There were two female family members who were cousins to Dr. Cheryl’s grandmother who were focused on education and building confidence in Dr. Cheryl. She informs me that they too were women of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated and were charter members of the graduate chapter we both belong to today. She says, “They were big on education and would ‘rah, rah, rah’ if they knew something good about me.”

She describes how they would have tea at her grandmother's house and say things like, "That granddaughter of yours is doing big things there at the university. We heard she got some awards." Dr. Cheryl softly smiles, "It was always that encouragement from teachers and extended family that kept me going."

When asked about the motivation to go to college and the educational goals the doctor set for herself, she returns to her mother. "I saw the struggle my mother went through, without having an education, and the majority of the people that I knew didn't have an education and I bought into the fact that... 'education can change your life.'"

Dr. Cheryl always knew she was going to college to enhance her education, but she wasn't quite sure what she would major in once she got there. During her first year while taking her core classes, political science sparked her interest. She compliments a professor who was over the Criminal Justice Department who'd previously been chief of police in Berkley, California. "He awed me every single time I went to class. I loved talking about investigations and about the sociology around criminals and why they do the things they do. I decided I would become an FBI Agent and got my degree in Criminal Justice."

She continues on about her interest in politics and the law and says, "I would say, when I was growing up that, 'I was going to be a lawyer.'" Yet when she was completing her first year in Law School and studying for finals, she recalls praying, "God, I don't have a clue as to what is going on but if you get me through these finals, I will know it is you." She successfully made it through finals and continued to pursue the law degree and with relief said, "I did great, but it wasn't until my second year that things

started to really click for me, so I kept going and believing that it was something that God has a plan for...I am still waiting to see what that plan is.”

Now I realize why I didn't know she had a J.D., I inquired about her current professional position.

I am way, way off track. I work at a pharmaceutical company as a Field Access Manager. I work along with the sales reps; once they have convinced the doctor to write the prescription for the medication, I go in and help the office staff get the drug approved. Our current drug called Repatha, lowers cholesterol, for chronic patients that are almost at the heart attack stage, costing \$14,000. Most people take Crestor or Lipitor because the insurance companies don't want to pay for Repatha. I go in and work with the office staff to get the documentation needed to get it approved.

Dr. Cheryl is not a practicing lawyer, but uses her critical thinking and problem-solving ability in her current position.

Dr. Cheryl synonymously describes herself as both an individual and a student. “I am very, very ambitious, very dedicated to anything I say I am going to do. I believe your word is your bond, so if you say that you are going to do something, then you should do it.” Like she has taken a bite out of a splendid dessert she comments,

I love learning, I love reading, and especially if I think it is something that is going to develop me more, grow me. I'm that way in both areas, so even now, I'm picking up something to learn more about the cardiovascular system, because I want to know how my drug fits into studies so that I can expedite the approval of the drug.

Dr. Cheryl describes her definition of success and shares her examples of success two fold, but not without saying, “That’s a good question.” She transitions directly to her quickly formulated response, “I would define success as being spiritually grounded and having your family with you...meaning your extended family as well as your elders being in good health. “ She does mention financial security as being a component of success, “I like money, but I wouldn’t say necessarily being rich. I would say being able to do what you need to do in life...having enough finances where you are comfortable.”

Dr. Cheryl participated in a summer program from the age of 14 until she aged out at 18 years old. When offering advice to educators, she is reminded of, Job Training Partnership Act Program (JTPA), a program she considered impactful in her life where she learned to work and get experiences during the summer. She believes young people benefited from the experience of meeting and being trained to work with educated people. “I don’t think they meet enough educated, well to do people. I think that has a lot of influence on giving a child vision as to what they can do or what they can achieve.

“Field trips!” She remembers taking more field trips as a child. “They don’t even hardly want to do field trips anymore. If you never see anything outside of your world, how do you know what is possible?” Dr. Cheryl confirms her thought, “Yeah, field trips are a big thing.”

“Be involved!” This is the advice she’s offer to parents of at risk students. She returns to her supportive mother, graciously praising her efforts:

My mom was my #1 Fan, no matter what I did. I was a majorette and even though my mom worked the graveyard shift; she was at every game. She did

everything she could to be there for us. She was a good support for us because she had a good support system.

It seemed to be a revelation as she went on to say:

I never felt slighted that my father wasn't in my life. I had uncles that were support centers for my mother. One made sure I got my dress for homecoming and arranged for me to ride in a car during the parade. One of my other uncles helped me get my first apartment.

Dr. Cheryl believed the family factors were significant in making recommendations to parents, but also firmly said, "Because my family was rooted in church...I never felt like I was without a father." She can't recall her mother ever partying or drinking but always working. "She went without and sacrificed so that we had what we needed and wanted."

Dr. Cheryl who now knows about medication and health care realizes her mother's job was demanding and likely, "Caused the physical ailments from straining her body and doing things at work she probably should not have done."

She concluded by stating, "Parents, be your child's #1 Fan!"

### **Jesse, Juris Doctor**

Dr. Jesse is the younger of two sons born to his parents. His father, who just recently passed away, was a well-known African American icon in the state and especially on the eastside of the city. Growing up in the city, I knew the name, family and what it represented; his father was active during the civil rights movement, peaceful protests, and sit-ins. Dr. Jesse and I are acquaintances because his wife and I are members of the same sorority. She also heard my request during the meeting and

connected us. I remember thinking, “I don’t think he qualifies for the study because of who his dad was.” I sent the E-mail Invitation to Participate in the Study (Appendix E) and expected him to decline because the criteria to participate included qualifying for free lunch, but to my surprise, he responded with “YES” in the subject line.

Dr. Jesse requested we meet at his law office in the heart of the city just a stone’s throw from the state capitol. It was a Saturday and there was only one car in the parking lot, and it was apparent it belonged to him. It was a late model black Corvette with red interior and the entire sports package; it was one that would make you take a second look. Gathering my things, I walked to the locked door and rang the bell. Dr. Jesse came to the door rather casual after playing golf earlier in the day. He was wearing his country club embroidered white collar golf shirt, khaki shorts, and a red Titleist hat. I’d left a wedding reception and was a bit overdressed in comparison. He immediately recognized my attire and explained how he’d been golfing. This allowed for us to talk about the business of our lives and fitting all the different commitments into our weekly schedules. He was complimentary of me and led me to his office.

The office décor immediately captured my attention. There were artifacts symbolizing his accomplishments and what is important to him on every wall, desk, table, and shelf. Photos of his wife and children, and photos of his father pictured with other distinguished African American leaders and other civil rights leaders. There was a beautiful display dedicated to his mother signifying her life; it was likely a memento provided to the family after her passing. Degrees and plaques of recognition and awards adorned the walls. There was evidence of golfing and fishing being favorite pastime activities. He shares these are things he did with his dad who passed away about a year

ago. He's a proud dad and has art his children created throughout the cozy space where he spends most of his professional time.

Dr. Jesse knows that I am familiar with his family lineage but also knows he is part of a study and provides a formal biography. Dr. Jesse knew I was likely internally doubting his qualifications. Without probing into his financial status, he discloses he was not first-generation college educated and his parents met at an HBCU in Tennessee and his father attended Vanderbilt Law School. "I grew up in poverty even though my father was a lawyer." Dr. Jesse describes his father as a community activist who often volunteered his time practicing law to, "give of himself to the needy and help individuals."

"I remember growing up in a small house in an all, Black community. Then, I don't think I considered myself to be in poverty, because I had the essentials: roof over my head, food on the table and in the refrigerator, but I still qualified to get lunch vouchers."

Dr. Jesse is the second of two boys born to this union which ended when he was about seven years old. The divorce was impactful on the family and both boys lived with their now single mother and experienced what he called, "financial hardships after the split." He recalls being about 13 years old, "times were really difficult, and my mom was struggling; she had to work two jobs to provide the necessary needs for us and the household." The boys had already been taught to not waste food, and to do more around the house to help out their mom.

Dr. Jesse described himself as a "rambunctious young fellow," who would get home from school and start playing outside in clothes his mother had worked to purchase

so that he would look nice at school. “I would go outside and play football, get holes in my pants and grass stains on my shirt. We were supposed to preserve our school clothes and change into play clothes.” Dr. Jesse laughs while thinking about himself as a young energetic boy. “I wasn’t a very good student.”

After revealing he was not a good student, a memory is rekindled and he vividly describes being in trouble and being placed in a coat closet by his second grade teacher. “I didn’t think I should be in the closet as part of my discipline, so I pulled out a magic marker and marked up her white fur coat.” He couldn’t believe it, but the teacher showed up at his house that evening and spoke to his parents, but his mom and dad didn’t think it was the correct punishment and explained there should have been another way to punish him. Laughing again, “In elementary, I did okay, but I did not exactly light up the class rooms. I was an average student.”

Middle school was much of the same, “...arriving home, playing outside instead of studying. I wasn’t concentrating on my school work. I did enough to get by.” Finally, in middle school, he understood the significance of school and education taking him to the next level. He went from making primarily B’s and C’s to A’s and B’s. “In high school, the light turned on, and I was a good athlete. I began to mature and realized I had to get good grades to matriculate from high school to the next level.”

Dr. Jesse earned an athletic scholarship to the same HBCU his parents had attended, in Tennessee. During his first year, he realized how much time it took to be a student athlete, and he didn’t see himself going to the National Football League. “So I concentrated on my books and said, ‘football can still be a part of my life, sports could still be part of my life.’” He decided he wanted to go to law school and be a sports agent.

While in college, Dr. Jesse became a member in Alpha Kappa Psi Fraternity. He remained involved in campus life through this brotherhood and described college after football as “a blast to be a part of...I look back and think, ‘I was pushing myself too hard. I should have stayed in undergrad longer than four years.’” He remembers the organization helping him to be a better person who was self-sufficient.

After completing college in four years, Dr. Jesse applied to Thurgood Marshall’s School of Law at Texas Southern University in Houston. He describes his first year of law school as, “another wake-up call.” Dr. Jesse realizes while being interviewed, “Life is a matriculation through each level of school. You go from elementary and work your way up to middle school, then back to the bottom; then you work your way up and find yourself back at the bottom of high school.” He continues with the description of high school to college and college to graduate high school but adds, “Once I got to law school that was something that I was not mentally prepared for; that’s the first time that I ever had to study 12 hours a day, every day.” Dr. Jesse explains his struggle with the copious reading of hundreds of pages nightly and the difficulty with unfamiliar terminology. “I’d sometimes have to read a case two or three times to comprehend it. I kept my Black’s Law Dictionary by my side.”

When asked about challenges faced, Dr. Jesse says one word, “racism,” and pauses. He’s making an impact simply waiting for the word to settle in for both he and the researcher. Dr. Jesse is reminded of his father and the way in which he taught him to fight racism, “He instilled in his children how to be strong, even at a young age, stand up, give respect and demand respect in return.” Dr. Jesse says racism motivated him to prove through his education he was equal and often times, superior in his thinking. All of his

schools were predominately black schools, even the Thurgood Marshall Law School was sixty percent Black. “People thought Black schools and universities were inferior to other schools. I used this as a challenge to prove myself.” He also enjoyed being surrounded with, “...people who cared for me and wanted to see me make it.”

Dr. Jesse didn't like feeling as though people were judging him and treating him negatively because of the color of his skin. “I formulated in my mind that people were treating me negatively because of the color of my skin, and I didn't like that feeling.” The frustration with racism also served as motivation for Dr. Jesse to go to law school.

I watched a strong man who fought for causes; not for personal gain or monetary gain, he just fought for the smaller person. He was called a ‘nigga lawyer’ when he walked into a courtroom. My daddy would remain professional while representing his client. He didn't disparage them in any way. He just stood firm on his principles and found within himself to say, ‘I'm going to be a better lawyer than you. I'm going to beat you in the courtroom with how I work this case.’ I was proud to be his son.

Dr. Jesse wanted to practice law to make his father and mother proud. “My success and completion of college and law school would demonstrate how much I appreciated them for the sacrifices they made to give me the opportunity to do it.” Law school was a struggle for Dr. Jesse, he admits he felt behind his peers in his classes and that meant he would have to work that much harder to progress to catch up with his classmates and surpass them. “I'm a competitive person, so I was not going to be in class and not be one of the best in class.”

Dr. Jesse recalls the question being about challenges and obstacles and then adds, “It was an adjustment not being at home, not being able to rely on my parents. I was on a budget throughout college and financial issues make it difficult. I remember going to bed hungry because I didn’t have any food.”

It was a good time to insert the question about his interpretation of the word, success. “For me, success is reaching a goal that I have set for myself, however big or small. I don’t have one level of success; my level of success continues to evolve as I get older.” As the interviewer, I needed clarification to get a better understanding of the participant’s definition of success, so I asked the following probing question, “What is a recent goal you set for yourself and accomplished?”

Dr. Jesse shares his adult children’s successes of graduating from college and taking care of themselves. He also has a 15 year old daughter who he desires to go further in life and reach her goals. “They’re the most inspirational part of my life! That’s the biggest thing that I feel I have done to be successful in my life...being a good father to my children and they are able to experience success.”

Dr. Jesse went on to describe himself as, “...fun and purpose-driven. I have always said that if I did something, I wanted it to be good enough to write about. If that is not the case, then I want to write about something good enough to read.” He’d already described himself as a student earlier in the interview without being prompted, but added, “If I were a young boy in a class today, they’d probably say I’m ADD (laughing loudly)!”

Dr. Jesse was willing to provide his advice to both educators and parents. He encourages educators to find a way to make learning enjoyable and to refrain from

making negative judgements about students. Dr. Jesse says, “Be patient with students and let them know you care about them and their learning. Be creative in making students be more involved and make them a part of the learning process.”

Dr. Jesse is brief, direct, and simplistic in his advice to parents, “Be involved. Believe in your children, and let them know you want them to be successful and will do anything to help them achieve their goals.”

### **Jerry, Medical Doctor**

Dr. Jerry is a well-dressed, tall, unassuming man, even on a Saturday while getting his tire changed. Looking around the waiting area, I found myself wondering, “Does he look like a physician? Do these people know his importance?” After several failed attempts to meet, Dr. Jerry called and stated he would either have to cancel or I’d have to meet him at the tire repair shop. Since he’s a medical doctor with young but extremely involved children, recognizing his extra time is limited but he wants to be a part of this study, I didn’t hesitate to agree to meet him wherever he wanted. Fortunately, it was an hour within closing time on a Saturday, and there were very few people seeking repairs. There were two different areas and we were able to meet semi-privately in one of the areas. To onlookers we likely resembled two people waiting on repairs who were simply having a conversation, as others could not hear us.

Dr. Jerry is the youngest of five children; he has four older sisters. They had a two-parent home where both parents worked but they were socio-economically disadvantaged. He describes his childhood home, “I grew up in a shack. When it rained the rain was inside the house, but you know we had food and we went to church every Sunday. I was the only boy, the youngest after four sisters, my mom thought that she was

done and she actually had an IUD. She was happily shocked when she had me.”

Dr. Jerry thought it was interesting since his mother had seven sisters and her first two sisters had all girls. He interrupts himself momentarily and smiles thinking about his own family and says, “I have four boys and no girls.” Dr. Jerry continues with his upbringing, “My father spent a few years in prison when I was eight to ten years old.”

Dr. Jerry shares his age and then begins to take me through the educational timeline from elementary through high school. He pauses briefly remembering going to a different class for gifted and talented students. Without prompting he shared fond memories of two English teachers, both African American males who, “cared about me and pushed me. They gave no breaks and I sometimes hated it, but they also talked about life and life lessons in the classroom.” Just as quickly as Dr. Jerry recalled two positive teachers impacting his life, he then shared a story of African American male middle school teacher who asked every eighth grade student to stand up and tell the class what they wanted to be in the future. “I stood up and said, ‘I want to be a pediatrician.’ He said ‘No, what do you really want to be?’ I replied, ‘I want to be a pediatrician, a doctor.’” Slightly shaking his head, smirking remembering the critical moment in his young life; he looks back up at me and doesn’t have to say anything because the satisfaction of disproving the teacher is enough.

It’s a great time to question Dr. Jerry about his challenges. Growing up on the far-east side of town while still in the metropolitan area but feeling like a small town, was challenging to him as an African American man. He hears the question as an African American male and responds by prefacing his answer, “As an African American man, in the community, there are simply challenges and obstacles.” He then says, “Self-doubt. I

used to stutter a lot I could not talk I could not start a sentence without stuttering for about 30 seconds.” Dr. Jerry sees self-doubt as one of his greatest obstacles to overcome and not necessarily the stuttering. He says he stuttered throughout high school and most of college and didn’t attempt certain things like running for leadership positions on campus because of the fear of a speech. But then he decided the only way he would overcome the problem, would be to, “Go for it, and just do it. I would say to myself, ‘Man no one is Les Brown, you’re going to stumble over a word every now and again it’s okay.’”

Dr. Jerry then gives more information about the struggle of growing up, “In my childhood with my dad being an alcoholic, I saw the abuse. I actually saw him when I was about 8 years old, fighting my mom. I grabbed my Dad’s leg and he threw me off of him.”

He then provides insight on his spiritual faith,

Statistically speaking I should be an alcoholic abuser, but I just keep my faith in God. My understanding of what being a man is from the example of Jesus Christ as far as how he was sacrificial and how he gave his all to the Church. So, that is what drives me even with my family, being sacrificial. I have never raised my hand to my wife; I don’t even raise my voice towards her. I never try to do anything that is like my father; I quit drinking coffee like ten years ago, I don’t drink coke because he did. I have never had a drink of alcohol in my life because I don’t want to be like him. That’s probably not healthy it’s probably a coping mechanism that I use.

Racism is another struggle Dr. Jerry sees as an obstacle he has had to overcome.

“I have dealt with racism and negativity but I think, ‘I have that confidence in myself to be able to say that I belong here in this career field and at this profession.’” The doctor remembers facing racism even in medical school, “People would actually say to me, ‘You must have had affirmative action to get in here.’ I would reply, ‘I’ve got the grades to get in here!’”

Like a well-structured essay, Dr. Jerry concludes his rich response, “Those were the things I dealt with, but the biggest obstacle was myself, self-doubt.” He tells of his hesitation of turning in his application for medical school because it was another time the self-doubt settled in as self-talk. He remembers the need to overcome with confidence the negative internal doubt while thinking, “Man, I can’t do this!” But with friends and family as support and my desire to overcome my own fears and self-doubt, I was able to go on and apply to medical school.”

Dr. Jerry gives credit to his mom for many of his accomplishments. Although she didn’t have a high school diploma, she encouraged him. She’d tell him, “Jerry, you’re smart; you can do anything.” After going to the in state HBCU where he received a full scholarship requiring him to maintain a 3.5 grade point average or higher, Dr. Jerry was called in because he had a 3.3 GPA. He said,

They said, ‘We are not playing with you, you can be kicked out of school and lose your scholarship. You have to make almost a 4.0 grade point average to keep your scholarship.’ And so, I had to buckle down. I made a 3.93 and my mom said, ‘You know you can do that every time. I know that’s you, you can do that if you want to. You just have to do it!’

He remembers his mother always being there as an encourager who believed in

him, at all times and held him to high expectations.

Dr. Jerry defines success as, “Being able to reach what you sought out to reach in life as far as goals that you set for yourself to attain, then you are at the point where you can be an influence on other people.” Dr. Jerry enjoys having pre-med students or pre-nursing students come into his office and ask questions to gain insight about the career field. He then describes his motivation for influencing others because others influenced him, “I had so many people that helped me whether it was encouragement or just a person being an example. It is great when you have achieved a goal and can help someone else who is coming up to achieve their own.

Dr. Jerry expands on his answer moving from professional success to private success. With emphasis he says,

In my opinion success is also being able to do those things in the confines of your family and not forsaking your family. I chose family medicine, because I love talking to people and I like to have a life outside of the office with my kids and my wife. There are people who know me that didn't know that I am a doctor because I coach basketball; I coached my oldest son from the 1<sup>st</sup> grade all the way through 7<sup>th</sup> grade. When my son was in 5<sup>th</sup> grade one of the players asked me, ‘Coach, what do you do?’ I thought it was interesting because he had no idea that I was a doctor. He just thought that I was a coach.

Being a great husband and father are an integral part of his definition of success.

I wanted that for my family that they never felt squeezed and would be able to say that, ‘Dad is out there living life but he is never home.’ That is what I think

success is: reaching a goal that you set out, helping someone else to reach theirs, and doing it in the confines of your family.

Although Dr. Jerry had already shared his 8<sup>th</sup> grade announcement of being a pediatrician, I wanted to know more about his educational goals and how he was able to accomplish the goal of earning an advanced degree. He replied, “I wanted to be a physician, I knew I had to go to college. I didn’t know what it took entirely but I think it was that I loved science and I wanted to help, that was my motivation.”

Dr. Jerry described himself as an individual, “I am a laid-back kind of guy.” He has been through the True Colors Training and added his color is blue, because he is a peacemaker always trying to fix things around him. He is a spiritual man, “I can do anything; the Bible says, ‘I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.’ I actually believe that is true if you give me the right resources and enough time, I can make it happen.” He describes himself as, “One who stays passionate about things that I enjoy such as fishing and other outdoor activities. I would say this is true about my wife and my family. My spirituality keeps me passionate about them.”

Surprisingly, Dr. Jerry says as a student, “I was in school when I realized I had ADHD, having untreated ADHD there was no easy way to get around that. I will go fix the bike outside first then go study tonight. I eventually learned how to set boundaries.” He characterizes himself as inquisitive about things, “I want to know why. In medical school they called me, ‘The Why Guy.’ He recalls being kicked out a couple of study groups for asking so many questions with the group was trying to prepare for an exam. He realized that is the way he learns, through inquiry and could get so focused on the why that he would sometimes get a “B” on an exam he could have gotten an “A” on, but,

“I wanted to understand why that is the cause as opposed to learning facts. I have learned that I don’t do well with just straight facts.”

Dr. Jerry offers advice as if he were giving a diagnosis and prescribing medication or a remedy for educators, parents, and students. He believes teachers need to expect more out of their students early on. He believes kids are going to work up to the expectations, ... ‘that’s just human nature’. Dr. Jerry shares a high school memory after the counselor saw his junior ACT score which was high. She called him into her office to discuss his future. Since he’s offering advice to educators, he is critical of the counselor who called him in March his senior year, “I already have a plan and a scholarship to pay for it; you should have been asking my classmates years ago what they were going to do.” He critically adds, “It looks good to put down on paper that you talked to me about college and I’m going to be successful. I think they need to start early putting that idea in the minds of the students and being intentional in their efforts.

He holds parents to the same expectations, “Parents have to model the idea that education is important early on to their children. Ask about homework assignments make education a priority and be excited about them doing their homework and getting a good grade and even if they don’t tell them, as an encourager, ‘What can we do to make this better?’” This is how he and his wife parent their own children. “We expect their best. I think some parents need to put that idea that school is important in their kid’s head, because kids are going to try to please them.”

To students facing challenges they didn’t create simply because of circumstances they were born into, Dr. Jerry says:

Don't lose faith; seek out people who can help you, because they are out there and they want to help you but they want to know that you want the help. They want to know that their time and effort is going to be worth something, just seek out people who you see are doing things with their lives. It doesn't have to be a doctor or lawyer it could be the guy who works at an auto shop and is he pushing you to do better than what you are. I want my kids to be way better than me I would love it if my kids out accomplished me, out earned me or whatever. Basically, don't give up and know that a lot of things don't take money or resources. It is hard to not have money, but not impossible, you have to be able to stand on your own two feet and say 'this is what I choose for myself,' even if they don't fit into the crowd in the neighborhood. Don't be afraid to defy other people's expectations; be willing to stand by yourself even if you stand alone.

When asked about additional information he'd like included to add value to the study, Dr. Jerry eloquently says, "I believe that I could do anything with God's help!" He then mentions a novice idea to the lay person, but a hot topic for educators and medical professional. It came from his inquiry on why people are successful in life and even in their health, he says, "People with grit had completely different numbers." Grit is not a term that is often used now but my take on it is, the ability to keep going even when everything looks bad, even though it's tough, even though you hate it, even though you're sick to your stomach, and even when there is no end in sight, you can still hang in there and have hope (Duckworth, 2013)..

Dr. Jerry says his mom raised gritty children. “She taught us to never give up.” Then he offers his application of grit in his own life.

Every day is a chance to do better than yesterday and if I don’t then tomorrow is another day. I never give up and say that it is hopeless on anything. The people I see that don’t give up because of bad circumstances and outcomes just have that grit to say, ‘Today is a better day. I’m still standing upright, and as long as I’m upright, I can still do better with the next day’. When my 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher didn’t believe in me at a critical time in my life, when I had the courage to stand up in front of the class stuttering my ambition to be a pediatrician, his doubt didn’t discourage me, because I am stubborn. I am gritty!

Dr. Jerry used that very moment of external doubt to fuel his accomplishments when he had self-doubt. He was fortunate to have family, friends and teachers who also believe in him. He recalls students, some from that 8<sup>th</sup> grade class so many years ago, supporting and encouraging him to submit his application to medical school and he had to get out of his own way and find the courage to reach his goal to become a physician. He hears the echo of his mother saying, “You can do anything you want to do.”

### **Summary**

This case study focused on six African American participants who defied the odds after graduating from a low socio-economic urban high school who achieved academic success ultimately earning a doctorate degree. These participants provided rich, thick descriptions of their educational journeys including challenges and supports that contributed to their success. A pseudonym was given to each participant to protect them

from any potential harm. Chapter V will detail the common themes that emerged from the participants' stories. I will also discuss the participants' stories and experiences through the lens of Nora's (2003) Student Engagement Model.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of Chapter V is to discuss the major themes found in the research and how they answer the research questions for this inquiry. The desire to gain a deeper, richer, more insightful understanding of the factors which led to the academic success of six African Americans, the following questions served as a guide to this research study.

Primary Research Question:

What factors or experiences do these selected African American participants, who have completed a doctoral program, report as influencing their educational success?

Sub-questions:

1. What personal qualities/attributes can be identified as contributing to their success?
2. What K-12 experiences/critical incidents have contributed to their success?
3. How did relationships contribute to the success of these individuals?

Yin (2014) noted, "...the case study is used to contribute knowledge of individual, group, organizational, social, political, and related phenomena" (p.4). This case study allowed the data to emerge and evolve while I gained a deeper understanding of the central phenomenon and the individual participants.

Yin (2014) described the case study method as a preferred research method when the "how" or "why" research questions are addressed, I had no control over behavior and the focus of the study is mainly exploratory and relied on the participants' views of the situation. According to Creswell (2013) a detailed understanding develops from analyzing a case. The significance in selecting qualitative research for this study is to explore and give voice to participants (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). As a qualitative researcher, it was my intent to understand the meaning people have constructed and desire to understand how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world (Merriam, 1998). My goal for this research was to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of graduating from a high poverty, urban high school and going on to attain professional degrees and construct the meaning of overcoming dismal risk factors experienced by the participants forged in discussions and interactions with other people (Creswell, 2014).

For this study, the case is bound by participant characteristics, geographic location, and time. Each participant in the study attended high school in a high-poverty district in a Midwestern state and continued his/her education to earn a doctoral degree. The purpose of this study was to understand how and why these African-Americans were able to defy the odds, uncover the themes that emerged from these individual's lived experiences, and explain how those themes have influenced their success.

Table 2: Coding of Factor and Experiences

Themes	Dr. Katie	Dr. Stanley	Dr. Sonny	Dr. Cheryl	Dr. Jesse	Dr. Jerry	Total
Needs Met							5
Two Parent Home					Divorced	Incarceration	2
Abuse Physical/Verbal/Neglect Experienced or Observed							2
Drug or Alcohol Abuse in the Home							2
Birth Order- Oldest, Youngest, Middle	Oldest	Oldest	Oldest	Youngest	Youngest	Youngest	3
College Was Not a Choice							6
Mentor							6
Success is...							6
Scholarship Money							5
Gifted & Talented			Athletic		Athletic		
Sorority/Fraternity							4
Encourager							6
Lifelong Learner (Why)							6
Lived with Someone Else		Temporarily					2.5
Negative Motivation							3
Extracurricular Activities in High School							5
Be the Best & Tell the Truth							6
Spiritual Relationship w/God							6

Sub-Question #1 Personal Qualities and Attributes	Yes
Sub-Question #2 K-12 Experiences	No
Sub-Question #3 Relationships	Explained

Both the primary research question and the sub-questions were answered through the interview questions designed to elicit what these six African American participants, who completed a doctoral program, report as factors and experiences that influenced their educational success. The participants had numerous commonalities, but there were specific themes that emerged and will be shared under the sub-questions in Chapter V.

### **What personal qualities/attributes can be identified as contributing to their success?**

The four themes that emerged with the triangulation of data from the interviews, observations, journal responses and artifact sharing were internal qualities, feelings, and attributes. Those most profound include the participants' feeling of having their needs met, although raised in poverty. Participants demonstrated a desire to be the best at the things they do and to keep their word and see things through to the end. The participants identified themselves as lifelong learners who enjoy knowledge and the discovery of new information and being challenged. Lastly, all the participants' definition of success created the theme of the importance of their contribution to their family, community, and impact on others.

#### **Needs Met**

All but one of the participants explicitly stated they felt they had all that they needed while growing up in poverty. They had an awareness of not having all the luxuries of life, but they felt they had their basic needs met. These participants didn't realize until they grew older and matured, that they grew up in poverty. One participant, Dr. Jerry stated, "As you get older you actually find out what poverty really is. The house I grew up in was a shack; when it rained the rain was inside the house, but we went to church every Sunday and ate dinner together."

When he described his family and his childhood home, Dr. Jesse's response was synonymous with the other participants, "We lived in a small house in an all-Black community; I did not consider myself to be in poverty. I had the essentials of a roof over my head, food on the table; but we were poor, I received lunch vouchers like many of my

peers at school.” The community he lived in was homogenous and there was no obvious distinction between the have and the have nots.

Dr. Stanley stated he came from a two-parent home where they both worked hard to make ends meet. He also felt he had what he needed while living in the only community he knew. His community was infested with drugs, prostitution, and gang violence. This was his normalcy and place of comfortability, but he specifically remembered overhearing a conversation when he was a child, “They were having a conversation about which bills would not be paid so that we would have something for Christmas.”

Dr. Cheryl admitted, “I never felt slighted or that I missed anything, and I’m sure that somewhere in the back of my psyche that I do, but I don’t feel that way.” She then reflected on her mother’s sacrifice for her children. “My mom went without, so that we had all that we needed, and she even worked harder and longer so that we even had many of the things we wanted.”

Five of the participants shared their truth of being in poverty and the challenges they faced but felt that did not make them feel inferior because they had the things they needed. These were added comments, as I never asked the question directly of any of the participants. It was as if the participants needed to explain their food and shelter security due to the nature of the study and the need to validate their parents’ hard work.

One of the participants had a different take on her needs being met, and her belly being full. Dr. Katie grew up in a two-parent home, but her parents’ addiction to drugs caused a middle class family to go, “from riches to rags.” She recalled having parents everyone else looked up to with good jobs, a home, nice cars and the finer things of life

and then not having utilities, televisions, a microwave, or even food to eat. Eventually, after moving in and out of other relative's homes, she recalled living with her grandmother while in high school and others thinking and saying, "It couldn't have been that bad, or that hard; look at you now." Dr. Katie did admit that her grandmother made sure they were involved in school "and didn't miss out on much as it related to extracurricular activities, but those were surface things," and remembered the insecurity of where she would lay her head at night.

### **Be the Best and Keep Your Word**

All participants saw themselves as individuals who are achievers, competitors, finishers, and tellers of the truth, keeping their word at all costs. These were all self-identified characteristics, personality traits, and goals each participant shared about themselves. Even when bored while working toward her MBA, Dr. Katie discussed her internal conversation, "Lord, I should have chosen something else, but I don't quit things. Once I start things, even a book, even if I hate it, I can't not finish it."

Dr. Stanley used the example of being a dishwasher when he was 16 years old, "I'm going to be the best damn dishwasher and I'm going to work my way up to manager!" He went on to say, "That's always my approach to everything, including education. If I'm going to do this, I'm going to take it all the way. If a PhD is the highest I can achieve, then that's what I'm going to do."

Dr. Sonny used the mistakes of his parents to help shape his future. He demanded he be the exact opposite of them. "I wanted to be the best I could be at whatever I did, especially in the area of parenting. I didn't want to be a liar to my kids. My word is my bond. I want people to be able to count on me." The memory of being abandoned by his

mom, and his dad's lies about picking him up to spend the night influenced his strong commitment to his children.

Dr. Jesse said, "I have always had the determination to complete my goals and I am not satisfied until then." He continued to discuss the difficulty of law school and his realization that he was behind some of his classmates,

I'm a competitive person. I could see that some students were above me when we started law school, but as the year progressed, with hard work and multiple hours of studying, I moved up in the class where we were equals. I didn't want to feel like I was behind or below anyone in my ability to learn. I was not going to be in a class and not be one of the best students in class.

Dr. Cheryl had similar thoughts and beliefs about finishing what she starts, "I am very ambitious, very dedicated to what I say that I am going to do. I believe my word is my bond."

### **Lifelong Learner**

Even after completion of a master's and doctorate degree, Dr. Stanley went on to pursue a Certificate of Graduate Theological Studies, not to work in the ministry, "but instead, I wanted pure knowledge." He wanted to have this degree because he thought he would one day want to teach a course in Religion and Politics. Dr. Stanley continues to take classes through Harvard University. He says, "I still love taking classes and feel it is my responsibility to my students to stay current in my field and my specialization."

Dr. Cheryl said with excitement, "I love learning! I love reading, and especially if I think that it is something that is going to develop me more." Dr. Katie agreed, "Education is what I do; it's easy and I enjoy it!" Dr. Sonny also passionately described

himself as a lifelong learner, “I am a student constantly wanting to learn, wanting to get better at what I do. I am never satisfied and want to learn more in teaching, coaching, and my spiritual life with Christ.”

Dr. Jerry was given the nickname, “The ‘Why Guy,’ because I asked so many questions.” He was even asked to leave study groups while in medical school because the answer was not enough Dr. Jerry, and he would detour the group towards the ‘why’ of the answer. Additionally, while in the waiting room of his pediatric office, unlike many others with televisions and toys overwhelming the space, his office appeared more like a cozy library where patients and parents could read. They were also welcome to take the books with them because Dr. Jerry believes reading is essential to brain development.

Dr. Jesse shared how much he enjoyed different parts of the law and learning, “It was enjoyable to learn my individual rights and how America evolved as a country due to the laws created and enforced.” He shared his love of learning and wealth of knowledge of cases specific to civil rights and how much he reads each day to remain current in his studies. He concludes with saying, “You have a responsibility to know a little bit more today than you did yesterday.”

### **Participants’ Definition of Success**

Each participant took a moment to ponder the question and prefaced their response with a compliment to me. Dr. Stanley said, “That’s a good question.” Additionally, all participants qualified their response by explaining what the definition of success was for them in years past or what people commonly think is success such as accolades, achievements, and money. Dr. Katie said, “I used to think success was about money, achievements, and stuff.” Dr. Stanley also said, “Success is not about monetary

or financial. Success for me is family.” He continued to discuss his extended family to include all of his students both present and past. Dr. Stanley said, “Success for me is the impact that I have on my students.”

Dr. Sonny’s response was similar; he started by explaining that it was not his athletic success as a Division I athlete or making it to the NFL, “Success for me is being a parent and being a positive role model for my own children, students and players.” Dr. Jesse was passionate when he discussed the success of his children and how they are the inspirational part of his life, “That’s the biggest thing that I feel I have done to be successful in my life...being a good father to my children and they are able to experience success.”

Dr. Cheryl described her definition of success as being two-fold, “I would define success as being spiritually grounded and having your family with you...meaning your extended family as well as your elders being in good health.”

Dr. Jerry’s response was profound, as he described the importance of setting goals, reaching them and then using his attainment to influence and inspire others to reach their goals. He said, “It is great when you have achieved a goal and can help someone else who is coming up to achieve their own.” He then transitioned from his personal and professional success to his private success. This led to his family, “Success is being able to do those things in the confines of your family and not forsaking your family.” Dr. Jerry was committed to being a great husband and father were an integral part of his definition of success.

### **What K-12 experiences/critical incidents have contributed to their success?**

The K-12 experiences and critical incidents revealed emergent themes indicative of external factors and incidents that contributed to the success of these African Americans. There were four primary themes evidenced through the triangulation of the qualitative data collected from the participants. The participants had outside influences making them believe college was not a choice, but an automatic extension after graduating from high school. Engagement in extracurricular activities in high school and being identified and served in the Gifted and Talented Program were additional themes that surfaced when open-ended interview questions were asked. Additionally, the participants recognized earning scholarships through academic and/or athletics as well as being poor which led to awarding of additional grant money and financial aid contributed to their success.

#### **College was Not a Choice**

When asked about motivation to attend college, all participants responded like Dr. Katie, “I never thought I had a choice to go to college.” Not only was it expected, but it was an escape for her, to get out of the state, away from her circumstances, and the opportunity to create a new life for herself.

Dr. Cheryl said, “I saw the struggle my mother went through without an education, so I bought into the fact that education would change my life. I always knew I was going to college, even though I had no clue as to what I was going to do when I got there.” Her teachers spoke to her as if college was the next step and only option after high school. It was their expectation that she would go, so she did.

Dr. Stanley recalled, “My mother stressed the importance of education and expected me to enroll in college immediately after high school, but unfortunately, I was not prepared and dropped out after the first semester. “You’re going to college; you’re going to Oklahoma University,” became a directive his mother placed in his head that would eventually come to fruition.

Dr. Sonny is thankful for his uncle who planted and watered the seed of academia. “My uncle who was the first African American football player from the University of Oklahoma to earn a PhD made it clear early on that I would earn a bachelor’s degree.” He believed in education and taught Dr. Sonny to take advantage of his rights saying, “Exercise your right to vote and to own a firearm, take advantage of the things people fought and died for. Exercise your right to get a great education.” Dr. Sonny wanted to make both his grandmother and his uncle proud, so he knew he would go to college and earn a degree.

Dr. Jesse was not a first-generation college graduate, and his parents expected him to attend college, and he had a desire to attend the HBCU both his parents attended. This is interesting, because his older brother grew up in the same home but didn’t follow in his parents’ footsteps. According to Dr. Jesse, his brother was intelligent but failed to go to college and was also not successful in high school. “I was motivated to go to college because I wanted to make my parents proud. I wanted them to know how much I appreciated the sacrifices they made for me and felt I could partially pay them back, earning a degree.” This was the expectation in his home, but being the younger of the two brothers, he knew it was important that he fulfill the expectations his parents set for him because his brother didn’t.

Three participants were the oldest of their siblings and the other three were the youngest. Five were the only child to complete college and an outlier emerged, Dr. Jerry was the youngest with four older sisters, three of his sisters earned degrees. Two of his sisters are registered nurses and the other an accountant. Although he already had a drive early on to go to college, during the interview he realized his sisters may have served as motivators so that he visualized himself going to college and one day wearing the white coat.

### **Extracurricular Activities**

All but one of the participants shared their active engagement in high school extracurricular activities. Dr. Katie was an active member of the band and also a cheerleader in high school. Dr. Cheryl was a majorette and was Homecoming Queen.

Dr. Sonny participated in numerous athletic extracurricular activities and excelled in football. Dr. Jesse attributed playing football as the extracurricular activity that helped, “the light turn on,” regarding academic attainment. His success in football encouraged his success in the classroom because he began to set goals and one of those goals was going to the next level as a student and an athlete. He was on the honor roll in high school. Dr. Jerry was a member of his high school band and participated in competitive varsity sports.

One participant in the study admitted that he was a participant in extracurricular activities, but outside of school when he was affiliated with gangs. Dr. Stanley admitted, “I started hanging out with gangs and doing things I shouldn’t have done.”

## **Gifted and Talented**

Four of the participants proudly disclosed they were identified and served in the Gifted and Talented Program in the school district and felt special because they were bused to a different location in the district on certain days of the week to be with other students who were also intelligent. Dr. Katie enthusiastically said, “They would bus us to another school and we had a different teacher, and I thought that was the best thing ever!”

“School is what I do.” While trying to stay humble Dr. Katie goes on to say, “This is almost embarrassing, but school comes easy to me.” Dr. Katie further explained, “I was an early reader. When I was in class all day and finished my work early, having three hours remaining, I would read to occupy my time.”

Dr. Stanley nonchalantly said, “I was a good student and exceeded the expectations of the teachers, especially in math and science because I was interested in those courses. My mom had stressed the math and science all my life.”

Dr. Cheryl boasted of graduating a year early from high school and described herself as a student saying, “I was always an ‘A’ student and graduated in the top ten percent of the class.” She remembered attending the Gifted and Talented Program and being bused to another school like the other participants who were in the program.

Two of the participants did not identify as academically gifted and talented to reach their educational accomplishments. Dr. Sonny remembered school K-12 being a bit of a struggle due to his reading disability, but said, “I was musically inclined and athletically gifted.”

After my follow-up interview with Dr. Jesse while he showed me around his office, I said, “I never asked a question that other participants mentioned and want to

clarify, ‘Were you ever identified as Gifted and Talented?’” Internally, I didn’t think so due to his vivid description of his K-12 experiences and his rambunctious behaviors as well as his average grades until he reached high school, but I wanted to make sure because all other participants disclosed they were gifted and talented students. Dr. Jesse, said through a loud laughter,

I’m glad you were trying not to embarrass me, because with my behaviors my teachers likely thought I was a special education student. I didn’t begin to apply myself until I understood the matriculation of school and the means to an end. I was able to use athletics as my outlet for my energy and excelled at it, but couldn’t do that without getting good grades. My brother was gifted with a photographic memory, but not me. I had to work hard, read and reread in order to achieve academic success.

### **Scholarship Money**

Five of the successful African American received significant academic or athletic scholarship money right out of high school to help cover the cost of college along with state grants and federal financial aid. Three received academic scholarships and two athletic scholarships. Dr. Katie said, “There was a scholarship program for math majors with high ACT Scores and GPA’s at the college in, Georgia; and when I visited, I accepted.” Dr. Jerry also received a scholarship due to his high ACT score and GPA.

Dr. Cheryl who credits her academic success to scholarships and grants said, I came through college when being poor was a good thing. I received academic scholarships, Pell Grant, Oklahoma Tuition Aid Grant (OTAG), and Oklahoma Higher Learning Access Program (OHLAP); I graduated from a four-year

university without any debt, Oklahoma University; and it was all covered by scholarships and aid.

Dr. Sonny received 24 Division I football scholarship offers and decided to attend the University of Missouri at Columbia on a full ride. Dr. Jesse also received scholarship money for his athletic ability and committed to play football at one of the HBCU's in Tennessee.

Dr. Stanley was the only participant who exclusively listed grants and financial aid due to socioeconomic status as his only source of income to pay for his college education. Alas, without scholarship money he dropped out after the first semester of his freshman year.

#### **How did relationships contribute to the success of these individuals?**

The thick, rich descriptions given by the participants of their personal qualities, K-12 experiences, and relationships help to explain their success. The relationship themes that emerged were primarily focused on people such as a parent or family member with high expectations, a mentor, and the connection to historically Black sororities and fraternities and Greek Life on college campuses. Yet there was an unexpected theme that emerged that did not include a relationship with people, but a spiritual relationship with God.

#### **Family Member with High Expectations**

Dr. Katie credited her grandmother for her educational support, expectations, and success. Although her grandmother only had an 8<sup>th</sup> grade education, she valued education and the opportunities it would provide for Dr. Katie. Her grandmother would say, "You're going to get your schooling. You're going to go to school every day and

you're going to get good grades, because, that's your job." Dr. Katie remembered having responsibilities and other jobs outside the school day at home so that she understood the value of contributing to a family and the importance of hard work. Dr. Sonny also credited his grandmother to be the most influential person in his life. "She taught me to be respectful saying, 'yes ma'am, no ma'am', to fear God, to go to church, work hard, and to get an education."

Dr. Stanley acknowledged his mother as his primary encourager and motivation to continue his education. She provided the high expectations early on, and her words were forever implanted in his mind even after dropping out after only one semester of college. He didn't want to continue to disappoint her.

Dr. Jesse became emotional when discussing the importance of his father in his life and how he not only set high expectations for him but modeled those same expectation in his actions. Dr. Cheryl said her mother was her "#1 Fan!"

Dr. Jerry credited his mother for much of his success due to her unwavering belief in him. When asked about support factors leading to his success, he immediately said, "My mom, definitely!" His mother, like Katie's grandmother didn't accomplish a high school diploma, but encouraged him to get his education. The words used to describe her support were similar to those used to describe Katie's grandmother. He said, "She didn't have a high school diploma and therefore didn't understand a lot of stuff, but she knew I could and world go far. She'd always said, 'Jerry, you're smart; you can do anything!'" Even when he was warned about the GPA he needed to maintain in order to keep his college scholarship and the next semester he went from a 3.2 to a 3.93 and he was proud to report to his mother the accomplishment for the semester. Dr. Jerry's mother

demonstrated her high expectations with this reaction, she said, “You know you can do that every time; you can do it if you want to. You just have to do it!” He smiled remembering her words of encouragement and high expectations.

### **Mentorship**

Dr. Stanley mentioned several mentors being extremely supportive throughout the years when describing his educational journey and successes. These mentors are former professors and now people he considers colleagues and friends. His comments led me to ask for his definition of a mentor. He paused briefly and then without interruption said, “A mentor is someone who is okay with taking on the responsibility of helping to aid or assist in making someone else a better human being.” He is grateful he had several mentors who helped him along the way.

Dr. Sonny recognized that he has stood on the shoulders of giants who mentored him in multiple areas of his life. He is thankful for his uncle who spent time with him and had high expectations for him. His uncle mentored and nurtured him by taking him weekly to the library and/or a football game on OU’s campus. He required young Dr. Sonny to check out books and have them read prior to the return trip to the college library the following week.

Dr. Jesse saw his father as his mentor and encourager, but he went on to discuss difference makers throughout his educational journey impacting his life. A third-grade Black male math teacher who, “...had a very positive effect on me, he was stern but fair...it was what I needed because I wasn’t doing the right thing. I think he saw potential in me, I did not see in myself.” Dr. Jesse gave the names of two other high school teachers, one who was his history teacher and football coach who went beyond the

curriculum and applied history to life. The other was his English teacher who he describes as, “ingenious in her methods to teach the content and the students.” Dr. Jesse is the only participant to attend all Black schools K-12 and both his undergraduate and law school experiences were at HBCU’s. He was intentional in sharing the fact that his teachers had primarily been Black throughout his education, but he was able to distinguish between those who invested in him and those that didn’t. All the teachers he listed as influential high school teachers were Black, and he shared about others in undergraduate school who were Black, but identified his favorite professor in college as a White man who, “...was smart, gifted in his knowledge of the law and how he shared it through an interactive class filled with discussion. He tied in things to make us think. From the time he walked in the lecture room there was discussion.” Dr. Jesse said, “I want to be like him; I want to be able to analyze cases like him. He taught us to solve problems and that’s what being a lawyer is, you’re a problem solver.”

Dr. Jerry also mentioned numerous mentors as scaffolds toward his success. Even when he didn’t have the funds to take a costly preparation course to study for the entrance exam for medical school, he went to his professors at Langston University where he received his bachelor’s degree and they provided him with resources, “...the old fashion kind of resources...text books and they tutored me.” When he doubted himself and fear had invaded his thoughts and he had decided not to apply for medical school, he said, “I remember not wanting to turn my application in to medical school because I was thinking, ‘Man, I can’t do this,’ and friends and family were my encouragers and support.”

Dr. Katie remembered the impression her grandmother made on her as a mentor, but also recognized the professor who taught Business Law during her MBA program. This instructor was a practicing attorney who sparked her interest in the law. He influenced her and helped her see the path to law school. Dr. Cheryl sang the praises of her high school teachers who expected her to go to college, but once she was there, she recalled a man who worked specifically with the African American students on campus, Black Student Services. He was a graduate of her high school and had secured a staff position at OU. “He made sure the Black community was strong on campus and we had kind of a subculture on a predominately White campus.” Dr. Cheryl remembered him being a mentor to her and many other African American students on campus.

### **Greek Life**

The majority of the participants pledged a historically Black sorority or fraternity during undergraduate school. They attributed this to being part of their connectedness to the university and the people there. It was one factor that encouraged them to keep their grades up, enjoy college life, and make personal connections with a group of individuals all pursuing similar goals, and contribute to their community. The organization served as a support for the participants who were members of Greek Life on campus and remain active members today. Dr. Katie and Dr. Cheryl are both members of Alpha Kappa Alpha, Sorority, Incorporated. Dr. Jesse is a member of Kappa Alpha Psi, Fraternity, Incorporated and Dr. Jerry is a member of Alpha Kappa Psi, Fraternity, Incorporated. Sororities and fraternities are organizations with high expectations of GPA and character to initially get into the organization and the requirement to maintain them at a high level.

Once a member of the organization there is a sisterhood or brotherhood who work arm-in-arm to serve the community and have specific initiatives.

Dr. Jesse reflected on his involvement with the Kappa Men, “In college, I did well; always staying above a 3.2 GPA. I got involved with my fraternity.” He smiled and added, “It was a blast!” Dr. Cheryl proudly discussed her involvement in college with the sorority and her continued service to the community and volunteerism as she remains active in the sorority, today. She referred to teachers who were Alpha Kappa Alpha Women who set an example for her and always had her thinking about college while in high school. Dr. Katie was recruited to be in the annual high school scholarship pageant during her senior year in high school that was sponsored by Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority. She remembered how the women were involved in the schools and community when she was in high school and their ability to show her the way to college with workshops during the six month pageant process. It was an easy choice for her to pledge the sorority on campus and connect with the organization on her college campus. Dr. Jerry remembered his involvement in the fraternity initially helped negatively influence the academic semester of a lowered GPA, but he went on to add how he loves the brotherhood he is forever a member. He said, “Those same brothers encouraged me to take risks, speak publically, organize my time and prioritize sections of my life and eventually to apply for medical school. I have a strong connection to my brothers of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity.”

### **Spiritual Relationship**

Five participants openly attributed their success to the personal relationship with God. Dr. Katie spoke of her resiliency due to her circumstances growing up, “It was bad,

but I just thank God. I don't discount the negative experiences in my life." Dr. Sonny when asked about success openly shared beyond his secular success and passionately said, "The most important thing for me is that I know my success will be when I leave this planet, I'm Heaven bound! As a Christian, that's my ultimate super bowl, to go to Heaven!"

Dr. Cheryl was humbled in her first year of law school and shared how she prayed to God that He would get her through finals. She believed He was the one who got her through those tough times in law school, and even though she is not currently a practicing attorney, she will continue to trust that He will guide her through her career steps. Additionally, Dr. Cheryl gave credit to her family's spiritual relationship with God and the church, "Because my family was rooted in the church...I never felt like I was without a father."

Another participant, Dr. Stanley eluded to a relationship with God, but he did not explicitly come out and say it at any point in the interviews or within his journal. He did share that he earned a Certificate of Graduate Theological Studies in order to have knowledge and eligibility to teach a course in religion and politics. Dr. Jesse's office is filled with spiritual symbols and artifacts reflective of his spiritual life. The displayed mementos of his deceased parents are adorned with spiritual representations of Christ. He shared with me the importance of his faith to get him through the toughest times of his life and how he observed his parents modeling that faith when they faced challenges and even death.

Dr. Jerry shared how his spiritual connection to God not only helped him as a professional, but as a man, husband and father to his children.

Statistically speaking, I should be an alcoholic and abuser of women, but I just keep my faith in God. I follow the example of Jesus Christ who gave His all and sacrificed for the Church. That is what drives me with my wife and my family. I give my all and love my family the way Christ loved the Church.

### **Summary**

Following the triangulation of the data collected from interviews, observations, and reflective journal writing, and success and family artifacts grouping the common factors into categories allowed me to categorize the essential factors that impacted the success of African-Americans who defied the odds. A special effort was made to uncover potentially meaningful and common characteristics, factors, and individual experiences of students that may have contributed to the academic success and degree completion for students who, according to experts, had a low probability of success due to distal risk. As the researcher, I experienced what Creswell (2013) referred to data analysis as a data analysis spiral where the process was simultaneous and interrelated, instead of distinct, sequential steps.

The emergent themes became apparent throughout the research process while listening for repetitive language and feelings stated by the participants, listening for resonant metaphors used by the subjects to explain their experiences, triangulating data from different sources, and finally constructing themes and revealing patterns based on all the data collected. Through continuous reflection of the subjects' detailed descriptions of their experiences in context, then with the research, I was able to identify those common themes between the participants while also being attentive to the divergent patterns within each individual experience.

I chose to categorize the emergent themes under the umbrella of the primary research question, but the sub-questions provided a better organizational structure for the themes to be shared.

Chapter VI will use the theoretical framework, Nora's Student Engagement Model (2002, 2003, 2006) as the lens to interpret the individual factors and experiences African Americans believe influenced their educational success. For further consideration, lessons from the successful African Americans who participated in this study will be shared with educators, parents, and students. Implications for research, theory, and practice are addressed and recommendations for future research are offered.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### **Introduction**

Chapter V revealed the emergent common themes that the triangulation of the data revealed as well as the answers to the primary and sub-research questions.

Primary Research Question:

What factors or experiences do these selected African American participants, who have completed a doctoral program, report as influencing their educational success?

Sub-questions:

1. What personal qualities/attributes can be identified as contributing to their success?
2. What K-12 experiences/critical incidents have contributed to their success?
3. How did relationships contribute to the success of these individuals?

Chapter VI used the theoretical framework of Nora's Student Engagement Model (2002, 2003, 2006) as a lens to view the themes of the African-Americans who experienced academic success in the face of the odds stacked against them. Additionally, the successful African Americans offer "advice" to educators and parents of students facing distal risk, as well as personal "advice" to the students based on life lessons learned as they navigated growing up in similar difficult environments filled with

obstacles impeding their pathway to success. Since the study focused on the perspectives of these African American outliers, they also provided final thoughts specific to the factors that made them outliers in their families and within their school communities.

Included in Chapter VI are implications for theory, practice, and direction for future researchers to investigate to add to the limited body of existing knowledge of successful African Americans. Chapter VI concludes with my own comments about the importance of qualitative research focusing on the academic success of African Americans that created a better quality of life.

### **Discussion**

Nora's (2003) model was created from the criticism of both Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) and Bean's theory of persistence (1980, 1983). Nora criticized previous work referring to researchers who focus their attention exclusively on nontraditional students after they have been admitted to college are only addressing part of the problem and may be overlooking what is creating barriers and limiting the degree of access for nontraditional students (Nora & Olivia, 2004). Nora's Student Engagement Model (2002, 2003, 2006) was selected as the lens to view this research because it includes the factors that influence student retention prior to enrolling in and attending college. The intent of the model is to identify specific latent constructs that have an impact on the decision of undergraduate students to drop out of college or to persist and remain in college. According to Nora and Lang (1999), it is no longer thought that the only factors to consider prior to enrollment in college are the student's academic performance, their class rank at the time of graduation, or, at most students; educational aspirations. A set of high school psychological experiences engaged by students prior to enrolling in college as representing precollege student characteristics (Nora

& Lang, 1999). The authors went on to find that past experiences include: leadership opportunities, anticipatory attitudes to attend college, student's sense of social self-efficacy, relationships with peers, and the importance of attending college expressed by parents and other significant adults impacted a student's transition to the college environment as well as the students decision to persist.

Nora's Student Engagement Model (2002, 2003, 2006) consists of six factors: Pre-college/Pull-factors, Sense of Purpose and Institutional Allegiance, Academic and Social Experiences, Cognitive and Non-cognitive Outcomes, Goal Determination/Institutional Allegiance and finally, Persistence.

### **Pre-college/Pull-Factors**

The Student Engagement Model (Nora, 2002, 2003, 2006) hypothesizes that students enter higher education with a set of pre-college characteristics such as high school experiences, academic achievement, specific psychosocial factors developed in the home environment as well as in high school, financial circumstances they bring with them as they enter college, and a variety of pull factors that range from family responsibilities to work responsibilities to extensive commutes to campus that contribute to a student's academic performance, his or her adjustment to college, and ultimately, to his or her decision to remain enrolled. Low-income students from nontraditional families typically prepare for college later in the students' academic careers (Nora & Crisp, 2008); disadvantaged nontraditional families face more obstacles with fewer resources that can assist their children in achieving their educational aspirations (Auerbach, 2004).

The model hypothesizes that encouragement by parents and significant others help the student make a successful transition and adjustment to college. The first component of

the model addresses the pre-college preparation and pull-factors that deter students from high school completion and higher education. The academic achievement of students in high school academics will help or hinder students' persistence later when they enter college. Additionally, in the first component the student's engagement in high school and the activities they participate in will likely determine their educational aspirations long before the college selection process begins (Nora, 2003). Financial assistance is a great equalizer for minority students from impoverished homes to overcome barriers to higher education (Nora, 2003). Family support is also important in the future persistence of a high school student headed for college. Parental encouragement and support extract a positive effect on a student's initial interest in college and integration into the college environment as well as the student's commitment and decision to remain enrolled in college (Nora & Cabrera, 1996).

A support system through words of encouragement and validation by parents has long been established as significantly impacting student persistence (Cabrera et al., 1993; Nora, 1987; Nora & Cabrera, 1996). Nora (2004a) considered that encouragement and support come in different forms (e.g., financial, emotional, psychological, etc.) and from different sources (e.g., parents, other family members, spouses, professors, etc.). En masse these different types of encouragement from a variety of people provide a safety net for nontraditional students that they come to rely on under stressful and non-stressful circumstances (Nora & Crisp, 2008).

There were pre-college pull-factors evident throughout the lives of all the participants. Pre-college pull-factors are the primary enhancement of both Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) and Bean's theory of persistence (1980, 1983) contributing to Nora's Student Engagement Model (2002, 2003, 2006). The addition of factors, experiences, and incidents

prior to enrolling in college made Nora's Model (2002, 2003, 2006) an appropriate theoretical framework for this study. As described in the data collected in Chapter IV and the emergent themes in Chapter V, pre-college pull-factors heavily influenced the academic success of the African American participants in this study. The emergent themes that connected the framework under the first factor of the model include: college attendance was not a choice but an expectation for the participants, previous academic achievement in school, involvement in extracurricular activities, significant financial scholarships and grants, and having family members and friends who provided support with words of encouragement throughout their educational journeys. Participants felt validated by the encouragers who always maintained high expectations and therefore, participants were able to identify numerous people who cheered them on to success.

Due to their aptitude for learning and achievement, engagement in multiple activities in high school by five of the participants, they were viewed as sagacious well-rounded students and were awarded academic and athletic scholarship money that paid for all or a great portion of their educational expenses. The participants also recognized that being high achieving students coming from impoverished homes made them beneficiaries of additional financial assistance and grants to fill the financial gaps and in many cases provided additional spending money for students each semester of undergraduate school. The students had to persist in their athletics and academics to continue to receive money each semester.

Initially, one participant dropped out after only one semester, as he felt unprepared for the rigors of college coursework at the university and was not awarded significant scholarships coming directly out of high school. After dropping out, he created additional pull-factors for himself when he became a father at a young age. His priority was to work

and take care of his family, but eventually, his daughter became his motivation to return to school to improve life for his family. Additionally, he remained motivated by his mother's desire for Dr. Stanley to earn a degree and he could hear her words of encouragement in his head and knew he had disappointed her. Dr. Stanley wanted to make it right and make her proud. He remained in the low-socioeconomic bracket and enrolled in a community college, continued to work full-time to support his family and received federal and state aid to pay for school.

### **Sense of Purpose and Institutional Allegiance**

The second component of the model addresses the student's initial commitment to attend a specific institution; allegiance to a specific school will improve the chances of retaining a student once they enroll in college (Nora, 2003). Supportive evidence of this positive influence includes past studies that all found evidence that the student's commitment to an institution put forth a positive effect on the student's decision to remain enrolled in college level education (Nora, 2006). Nora notes that as students enter a higher education institution, they come with a sense of purpose in mind and an institutional allegiance to the college in which they are enrolled (Nora, 2002). Those students whose educational aspirations have been positively formed prior to enrolling in college are more prone to engage in those activities that enhance the student's chances of becoming more academically and socially integrated into their campus environment. Furthermore, those students that are strongly committed to attending a specific institution will also be more likely to engage in academic and social activities that provide them with those experiences necessary to successfully meet the challenges faced during college.

Chapter IV and Chapter V reveal data confirming all participants were motivated to attend college immediately after high school and never thought of attending college as a choice, but instead as a direct extension of their educational journey after high school completion. Dr. Jerry remembers standing up in his middle school classroom not only knowing he was going to college, but that he would be a pediatrician. The idea of college was implanted in Dr. Katie's mind by her grandmother when she was in elementary school, but the difficulty of growing up with drug addicted parents increased her motivation to go to college out of state so that she could "...escape and develop as a person." She was good at math, and had a high ACT score and cumulative GPA; when presented with a scholarship for math majors, she took it.

Additionally, the commonality of each participant's definition of success created a theme; all participants want to make an impact on the lives of others. The desire for the participants to make a difference and help others to achieve their goals aligns with Nora's (2006) sense of purpose. Success reached beyond financial and academic accomplishments and had a deeper meaning to each of the participants. Dr. Katie passionately stated, "I want my life to be a legacy. While I'm alive, I want to create the next person that is me and beyond." Dr. Stanley confirmed saying, "Success for me is the impact that I have on my students." He described how inspiring them to reach their goals, is success. Dr. Sonny commented on his feeling of accomplishment when his students return to him sharing how he influenced their lives for the better. Dr. Jesse's definition of success was similar to the other participants and he shared a quote he lives by, "I want to be good enough to write about, if that is not the case, I want to write about something good enough to read." Finally, Dr. Jerry

communicated his definition of success as reaching goals he set for himself and then helping others to reach their goals, as well.

Three participants completed their bachelor's degree at HBCU's. Dr. Jesse desired admittance and attendance to the same HBCU where both his parents attended in the south. He was fortunate to get a scholarship offer to his parents' alma mater and he eagerly accepted. Dr. Jerry was offered two full-ride academic scholarships, one at a predominately White university in the state and the other at the only HBCU in the state. After growing up in predominately Black schools, Dr. Jerry decided he would attend a prominent HBCU in his home state. Dr. Katie took the full-ride academic scholarship at the university in Georgia, also an HBCU. She saw college as an escape from her difficult life and when they offered her a scholarship, she stated, "I'm getting out of here!" She described in her matter of fact way, how she went for a college visit in, Georgia, "There was a scholarship there. I accepted and that is where I went to college."

Dr. Sonny who was a Division I athlete recruited by 24 different universities made his decision based on the relationship he built with the coaches during the recruiting process and although the university was out of state, it was only six hours from home. The allegiance for most of the participants was influenced by the scholarship money offered to attend. Dr. Cheryl had an allegiance to her university, because she had enough scholarships and grants to cause her to be debt free after four years at the university. Additionally, although she did not attend an HBCU, she described an African American staff member on her predominately White campus who was the overseer of Black Student Services and made sure the students felt insulated on campus but also integrated with all the students.

## **Academic and Social Experiences**

Academic and social experiences have been the focus of many higher education administrators because they seem to be the most influential on the persistence and retention of Hispanic students (Nora, 2002, 2003; Nora & Cabrera, 1996); Nora et. al 2006). Academic experiences include both formal and informal interaction with faculty and campus leaders. Faculty can also have an enormous influence on a student through mentoring and validation in and out of the classroom. These interactions in the academic environment create a positive association between the student and the institution as the student associates the people with the institution. Social experiences include peer group interactions, perceptions of prejudice and discrimination, and encouragement and support from faculty and fellow students. Perceptions of prejudice and discrimination are easily sensed by minority students both in the classroom and on campus (Nora & Cabrera, 1996). As a result, these social experiences affect their academic performance, experiences with faculty, and intellectual development.

College students undergo a variety of academic and social experiences that facilitate their integration both in the classroom as well as outside of class. The level of encouragement and support provided by different members of the academic community through the interaction of the student with faculty and peers in academic and non-academic activities help to form the student's final commitment to the attainment of an undergraduate degree at the respective institution. These academic and non-academic activities include such ventures as participation and involvement in different organizations and clubs on campus, attendance of social events, tutorial assistance, mentoring experiences, classroom validation, and informal academic interaction with faculty (Nora, 2006). Mentoring, based on Cohen's (1996) conceptual framework, helps to shape the student's quest for a college degree, exhibit

a high level of commitment to an educational goal, exert effort in his or her studies, and to assist students in making themselves feel at home in the academic and social culture of their campuses and not an outsider. Several intermediate outcomes are derived as a consequence of students' academic and social experiences during college.

All participants identified the influence of college professors who inspired them. During the initial interview, several of the participants remembered sitting in a classroom and admiring the wise, talented, engaging, relational instructors and thinking, "I can do that. I want to be like him." The only participant who already knew what he would major in because of the profession he wanted to do for the remainder of his life, was Dr. Jerry. All the others, while describing their educational journey and reason for pursuing advanced degrees, shared how the decision emerged or evolved due to the influence of a great teacher during college. These participants felt they made connections with faculty at the university during coursework.

The theme of participants being members of Greek Life and feeling connected to their peers and other students on campus was a theme that aligned with the Social Experiences of Nora's Student Engagement Model (2002, 2003, 2006). The membership of four of the participants in either a sorority or fraternity was identified as a beneficial social organization that helped to integrate students into college life and provided allegiance to each other and the institution. The participants boasted about the longevity of the lifelong relationships that continue today. All four are financially active members of their fraternity or sorority. Dr. Jesse affectionately described his fellow members as "brothers," who encouraged him in many areas of his life. Dr. Jerry passionately said, "I have a strong connection to my

brothers of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity.” He then demonstrated the hand signal for the Ice Cold Brothers of Alpha Phi Alpha.

Dr. Sonny was not a member of Greek Life but was a member of the football team, which also provided a brotherhood and connections to coaches and graduate assistants who were responsible for encouraging success both on and off the field.

Dr. Stanley didn’t join a fraternity and was not on a team and the lack of the support and connections the first time he enrolled in college may have helped lead to him dropping out. But, when he decided to reenroll at a community college almost ten years later, he felt more comfortable in that setting with a diverse student population of students and many who were just like him, working full-time with a family desiring a degree.

Lastly, Nora included in his research Cohen’s (1996) conceptual framework for mentoring under the factor of academic and social experiences. All participants identified one or more mentors who helped shape the student’s quest to complete college, commitment to educational goals, work ethic to stick to it until the end, and assisted with the feeling of belonging on campus and in the classroom.

### **Cognitive and Non-Cognitive Outcomes**

Cognitive factors influence persistence including educational grade point averages (GPAs) and the development of students to recognize their obvious real intellectual gains and perceived gains while in college (Nora, 2003). Non-cognitive gains include a greater appreciation for the arts, embracing diversity, and heightened self-esteem. Cognitive, as well as non-cognitive gains are made by the student in such areas as critical thinking, science reasoning, reading comprehension, appreciation of fine arts, acceptance of diversity in people and thoughts, and conceptualization skills, and course grades.

Primarily all the participants had been good students in high school, and the majority did well in college without being challenged. Most of the participants discussed how easy school and college had been for them. Once they started their doctoral program, that is when they said things like Dr. Katie, “I was not challenged until I went to law school.” Dr. Jesse said, “I spent hours reading briefs over and over again, until I could comprehend.” Dr. Cheryl said, “I never had to study before.” She even described how she prayed that God get her through finals and she would then know if she would continue. Dr. Katie also added, “I had to learn to study.”

### **Goal Determination and Institutional Allegiance**

Goal determination and institutional allegiance relates to the extent students are determined to attain their future goals that may include going to graduate school. Allegiance to the institution refers to the student’s perceived sense of belonging and whether the college experience has been worthwhile and meaningful (Nora, 2003). Nora hypothesizes that part of those gains include the development of resilient behavior and attitudes necessary to offset any negative experiences that the student might encounter (Nora, 2006).

Goal determination was significant to the participants who all had the personal quality of needing to be the best and persisting to the end. Dr. Katie shared her need to always finish what she starts, even if it’s a book she doesn’t like, “I have to finish it.” After spending time with the participants it was obvious, once they made the decision to apply to school for the advanced degree, they had already decided they would complete the program successfully. It was evidenced in every facet of their educational lives, professional lives, and personal lives. The personal attribute of being the best was also evidenced in each participant, but the drive for three of the participants was fueled by proving something to themselves and to others.

Dr. Stanley needed to please his mother and keep his promise and then go beyond getting a bachelor's degree, a master's, and multiple doctoral degrees. He pushed himself to achieve these degrees rapidly because he felt behind due to his late start after dropping out college at the first semester of his freshman year.

Dr. Katie also had something to prove. She came from negative consequences associated with poverty, but also had to face the humiliation and teasing from cousins who looked down on her and her family. Those negative comments provided additional motivation to persist in her goals.

Dr. Jerry used the experience of boldly standing up in his 8<sup>th</sup> grade class speaking his truth of being a pediatrician. He stuttered through the statement and then the teacher embarrassed him directing him to stand again, "...now, tell the class what you really want to be." This was life changing for young Dr. Jerry. Although he believes teachers have the power to change the trajectory of a child's life, he refused to allow this teacher to detour him from his goal. Instead he keeps the words tucked away and only retrieves them when he has self-doubt and uses them to prove even himself wrong. Yet he also has the words of affirmation his mother spoke to him, time and time again, to suppress those negative experiences. "You can do anything you want to do." These are cases of the resiliency needed to offset the negative experiences students faced K-12, college, and graduate school. The negative motivators emerged during the data collection in Chapter IV.

### **Persistence**

According to Nora (2003) persistence refers to whether the university is successful in creating a space where the student feels passionate enough about his/her education to reenroll in the institution of higher education. All of the students reenrolled and demonstrated

persistence, reenrolling semester after semester, year after year. All the African American outliers in this study received their advanced degrees from a different university than their bachelor's degree. Dr. Katie received both her master's and her juris doctorate from the same university.

### **For Further Consideration: Participant Lessons from their Own Experiences**

During the data collection process, participants were asked to keep a journal and respond to two questions in that journal (Appendix C); Question 1: You grew up in an environment and attended a school where neither you nor your peers were expected to be academically successful. What made you different? Question 2: What advice would you offer to those students who have been identified as having distal risk? Each participant provided details concerning the lessons that he/she had learned from life journey experiences. The participants expressed this information as “advice” that they would give to others who aspire to improve their life circumstances. It is understood that findings from qualitative research are not generalizable; therefore, this information will not be communicated as “advice” for this study. Rather, it is communicated here as insight gleaned from their experiences and life journeys. This information is important because others who are experiencing similar circumstances or challenges may glean important information from these hard-earned lessons learned by these participants.

At the conclusion of the initial interview, the participants were asked about “advice” that they would give to educators and parents during the initial interview; Question 10: What advice would you offer for educators who are working with high risk students? Parents? (Appendix C) Participants were given a copy of the initial interview questions along with the journal questions to take home. Although the questions were listed as stated above with

emphasis on Q1 being about what participants perceived made them different from their peers and Q2 regarding “advice” to students facing similar circumstances, four of the six participants changed the order of the two journal questions during the follow-up interview. This caused me to change the order of reporting, as I concluded Chapter VI.

### **What Lessons Did you Learn Along the Way?**

**Lessons Pertaining to Educators.** Dr. Katie, started with the hiring practices of school administrators. She stated, “Hire a variety of people who can identify with your student base or can relate to your student base and have knowledge, background, and education proving they aren’t just there and the students are not a project.” Dr. Katie passionately continues by saying,

Teachers should not be there for themselves, but for the students. You must be there to serve them. You don’t have to be a stand-up person when you’re working in the accounting department or in IT fixing computers. You can be a crappy person! You cannot be a crappy person and shape the rest of our world. That’s what teachers are doing. They are creating our world.

Her final lesson learned for educators of students facing obstacles, “Make sure kids are your focus and your heart is in the right place. You have to see them through the lens of potential.”

Dr. Stanley encouraged educators with what not to do, “Don’t preach to these kids!” He warns against telling students what they are doing wrong or poorly, but “...instead, explain to them that there are better options, better paths. Try to put yourself in their position; try to understand.” He also urges them to, “...provide off ramps when they are going the wrong direction and then be a GPS, rerouting them to the onramp of opportunity.”

Dr. Sonny suggested, “Care about who you are working with. Have passion for what you do. Children need help. Be able to walk into someone’s home, see what they are going through and help.” Dr. Sonny was a beneficiary of good teachers who helped him to overcome his reading disability. He spoke highly of the teachers who recognized his struggle and then took the time to help him. Dr. Sonny advised educators to, “...find light in your students and build upon their success in order to strengthen their weaknesses.”

Dr. Cheryl was specific due to the experiences afforded to her during her youth. She believes young people should be exposed to different people and experiences. Dr. Cheryl believes that educators should take students on more field trips beyond their community and show them unfamiliar places, people, and occupations. She asked a question to provoke educators to see the value of field trips, “If students never see anything outside their world, how will they know what is possible?”

Dr. Jesse believes that educators need to find a way to make learning enjoyable and refrain from making negative judgements about the students they serve. “Be patient with students and let them know you care...and involve students in the learning process.”

Dr. Jerry said, “Teachers need to expect more of their students...students will rise to meet those expectations.” He went on to add, “Educators need to start early planting the seed of academic success in the minds of the students they serve and then be very intentional in their efforts to help the students achieve success.”

**Lessons Pertaining to Parents.** Dr. Katie explained that she had learned much about parenting. She stated, “Kids didn’t choose to be here!” Her words are piercing but gentle, “Your kids need you.”

Her words created a visual as Dr. Katie continued to eloquently express:

You can tell your children that they can be anything in the world, but be realistic about the scenario in which they live and the circumstances under which they can grow. Then as a parent, you must water them under those circumstances and let them grow.

Dr. Katie then is visibly filled with hope, joy and excitement as she shares her journal entry. “I think there is no limit...because kids in the worst situations can grow up and be the best people. I’m not talking about me. You can see it, you can see them and think, oh my God, the potential; oh my God, the possibilities!”

Dr. Stanley learned the value of parents becoming involved and owning the responsibility of motivating their children to achieve more than their parents. He suggested that parents need to buy-in to the culture of wanting more for their children so that the students then want more for themselves. He attributed his achievements to his parents, “My parents wanted more for me and said it and demonstrated it in their actions.” Dr. Stanley realized when his parents were pushing him academically, they were also sharing their belief that education was his way out of poverty.

Dr. Sonny admitted parenting is difficult and that parents need training on how to parent their children. He was motivated to be a better parent than his mom and dad were to him. “Because of the mistakes my parents made with me, I think that was the best training.” During the interview, he repeatedly referred to his father as a liar. Dr. Sonny shared his disappointment in his absentee mother. Then he praised the work of his grandmother, “She was probably the most influential person in my life!” She expected respect and taught young Dr. Sonny to display impeccable manners and to fear God. Additionally, he would follow his

adoration of his grandmother with acknowledgement of his uncle who mentored him as a student, athlete, and as an African American man.

Dr. Sonny then used a song to express the importance of being a parent:

It's that Michael Jackson thing, *Man in the Mirror*; look at yourself first and see where you are in your children's lives. Don't just wag your finger and move your head. Don't use excuses, but get better at looking at yourself and improving as a parent, for your kid. They are counting on you and watching your every move.

Dr. Cheryl advised parents to, "Be involved! Parents, be your child's #1 Fan!"

Although her mother was a single parent, Dr. Cheryl had an involved parent who was her #1 Fan. Additionally, her mother was a spiritual leader in her home, and Dr. Cheryl is glad her family was, "...rooted in the church." Her mother went without and sacrificed so that Dr. Cheryl and her siblings didn't have to do without. Dr. Cheryl believes parents should do the same for their children.

Like many others, Dr. Jesse believes in the importance of involved parents. He explained, "Be involved. Believe in your children, and let them know you want them to be successful." His words involved the purposeful actions to then go beyond believing and saying it to their children. "Then do whatever necessary to help the student, your child, achieve those goals."

Dr. Jerry and his wife use his mother's model of parenting in the parenting of their own children. "We expect their best." According to Dr. Jerry, parents should value education and share the idea that education is important with their children. He firmly believes that children have a desire to please their parents, so if the expectations are high, students will strive to achieve those goals set by parents. These examples of goal setting,

working to reach those goals with help from adults will teach the children to set their own goals.

**Lessons Learned Pertaining to Students.** Dr. Katie believes that students facing distal risk should look internally. She explained the importance of, “Get somewhere by yourself – not once, but whenever things get cloudy and uncomfortable – and figure out what YOU want. What YOU are looking for in life and who YOU are.” She shared the reality that those things will change as time passes, and “...change is okay.” She included the expectation of obstacles remaining, and some even becoming mountains, but the knowledge that, “YOU have the power to change your own personal situation. Chart your own path, and stop worrying about impressing people, or letting people down with your choices. Living a happy and satisfying life is impressive.” Dr. Katie became more personal as she shared her journal response, “...and that is not to say that mediocrity is acceptable or even desirable, but we cannot let others define what greatness is for us.” The change of the pronoun from YOU to us and we demonstrated the intimacy of the lesson learned. “Because if we do (let others define our greatness), we are living up to someone else’s dream – a dream they likely haven’t lived up to themselves. And that is not fair.”

Dr. Katie learned to understand the importance of self-awareness, self-pride, and self-comfort. Then she said, “Life is full of people and things that will be hard on you, but you do not have to join in on that harshness. SOMEONE has to pat you on the back and provide encouragement, and that someone can be YOU.” Dr. Katie has come to realize the advice she would like to have had as a maturing young lady and has now integrated this into her own self-image,

If I don't love myself, if I am not proud of myself, if I don't care about how I present myself or about what I contribute to this world; how can I ever expect any of those things from anyone else? And what I have found in my own life, when you do things that you can be proud of, it becomes less important to be validated by others. BUT there is a bonus, others will begin to notice, and you will be recognized. Then you can use your voice, position, knowledge, and experience to help others who are traveling along a similar path filled with obstacles impeding the road to greatness and you will be able to provide direction.

Dr. Stanley has the opportunity to speak to youth growing up like him; he relates to them through the sharing of his experiences and then does what he asks the educators and parents to do: try to understand the students, relate to them, expose them to better options and choices, and share the importance of education and the opportunities it can create for them in the future.

Dr. Sonny shared his belief about facing challenges and obstacles with three words: "Choices, Decisions and Consequences." These are the words he lives by in every aspect of his life. "Regardless of your situation, you have to evaluate the choices you have, and make your decisions based on those choices, and be ready to deal with the consequences...good or bad." Dr. Sonny has these words posted in his classroom and locker room. As a keynote speaker, he shares these words across the country to inspire young people.

Dr. Cheryl's believes the way to success is simple, "Be ambitious and set your goals and remain dedicated to achieving those goals."

Dr. Jesse included the use of negative experiences, challenges, doubt and discrimination from others to motivate them to create their own self-image: "Recognize the

negativity and decide to change the trajectory of your life.” He wanted the students to, “...expect the naysayers, be prepared for them, and welcome them as motivators in your life.” Just as he discovered the matriculation of being at the bottom and doing the work to get to the top at each level of his educational journey, he said, “You can start at the bottom but you have to climb to the top.”

Dr. Jerry’s response was prefaced with an understanding that the students are likely facing circumstances and situations they did not create. Just as others may have created the obstacles, he encouraged students to, “...seek out people who can help you, because they are out there, and they want to help you.” He shared the need for the people who are helping wanting a return for their time, effort and resources provided. “You are an investment.”

Again, he acknowledged the obstacles and negative feeling that may be internalized and said, “Don’t lose faith. Don’t give up. It is hard...but not impossible. Don’t be afraid to defy other people’s expectations; be willing to stand...even if you have to stand alone.”

### **Final Thoughts: What Made You Different?**

At the follow-up interview, Dr. Katie brought her electronic copy of her response to both journal questions. When I asked her to share her journal, instead of just discussing with me, she read her heartfelt response. She delivered the lesson like a keynote address, and I decided to include her response word for word.

While students at my school were not expected to be successful, I as an individual *was* expected to be academically successful. I was considered a star at my high school. Which at times made life there uncomfortable. It was as if the teachers and administration there saw something and latched on for dear life. What was not understood, however, was that I was just like the other kids there – in need of

something that was missing. It just wasn't necessarily the ability to learn quickly. My need was more social. And that need is not nurtured in society, generally. In fact, it was the opposite. Because I and a few others were considered highly intelligent, we were separated. AP classes that never had more than ten students at a time, special attention and permission to do things and be places that other students were not. But, for me, this compounded the issue that I actually had. Or the need I actually felt. Which was to interact in the world as "regular." To have "regular" friends and to not have everything around me be focused on achievement and intelligence. So, I had to learn to make my way in that area on my own. So I became a cheerleader. The thought process was "intelligence" based, but the experience was amazing and gave me exactly what I was looking for. I was able to interact with all of the other students in a way that didn't separate me but allowed me to get to know kids just for who they were, as much as that is possible in high school, and for them to do the same with me. I was no longer just "the smart kid," I was Katie. And whatever that meant to whomever I happened to be interacting with, it made a world of difference to me. I was a kid looking for acceptance. As we discussed before, I had spent most of my childhood being a people pleaser, living up to the expectations that had been set from my prior performance, so far – performance was an afterthought to me. So again, I am not being ungrateful for intelligence. I appreciate the blessing. I am saying that "smarts" and the future aren't the only areas a child needs to be nurtured. We've got to produce complete little people so that they can become complete big people.

Dr. Stanley went from gang member to professor and recalled the words he heard from all the people in his life, including: educators, parents, and Original Gangsters (O.G.'s or older gang members). "This is not the life for you; this is not the life we want to see you live. You're better than this and you will do more than what we've been able to do."

When Dr. Stanley told the story it even sounded ironic to him but he went on to say, "Their words resonated with me. I'm hearing from gangs; I'm hearing from teachers; I'm hearing from parents...you know all the people who were trying to pull me away from that situation but ultimately, it took me...in order to walk away from the gangs and all of that...that surrounds gangs. I had to believe it and do it, myself."

Thereafter, he used those same words as encouragement to reenroll in college some ten years later after dropping out.

Dr. Sonny believed the reason he made it and others didn't was due to the investment his grandmother and uncle made into his life academically, emotionally and spiritually. He was with them the longest, as his younger siblings spent more time with their mother than Dr. Sonny. Additionally, compared to his classmates, he believed his athletic ability was nurtured by coaches and therefore his teachers saw his potential to go to college on a football scholarship and built his academic skills to achieve that goal. He also added, "I was taught to be articulate, passionate, well-read, and to demonstrate good manners and a Christ-like character. I believe people were drawn to those things that set me apart from my peers."

Dr. Cheryl was the youngest of three children and by the time she was in high school, her siblings were adults, out of the home and had their own families. Dr. Cheryl was the only child to graduate from college. Like her siblings, she wanted to move away from the

eastside, but took a different route. They worked and moved out and she decided to go to college.

Dr. Jesse grew up with an older brother with the same parents and upbringing, but they took different paths. He admitted his brother was more intelligent with a photographic memory, but he struggled in school. “He had all the assets to do great things, but he lacked the will and determination to do it.” According to Dr. Jesse, “I had less intelligence and aptitude for learning, but developed a strong desire to reach my goals and be the best at each one.” Additionally, he had the motivation to make his parents proud after watching his parents’ disappointment in his brother.

Dr. Jerry was the only boy and youngest of five children. All but one of his sisters attained a college degree, and she also does well in her career working for Medicaid. He attributed his success along with that of his sisters to his mother who believed in them and taught them to believe in themselves. Additionally, he credits his sisters as great role models, “...paving the way toward academic success.”

Lastly, at the final interview, I realized there were commonalities between Dr. Jerry and Dr. Katie, so I asked him if there were others in his high school graduating class who fared as well as he had. He said,

Why yes, there was one other, her name is Dr. Katie, and she is a lawyer. We were in accelerated classes together, Gifted and Talented. She was a cheerleader, and I played football. We were both in the band. She would be good for your study. She is currently running for a district judge position.

## **Implications**

### **Implications for Theory**

Nora's Student Engagement Model (2002, 2003, 2006) postulated six pre-college, in-college and environmental factors that impacted a student's transition to college, persistence, and graduation. Although Nora's Student Engagement Model (2003) was originally designed for Hispanic students, there have been several studies where Nora's theory was applied to other nontraditional student groups. This study of academically successful African Americans who persisted, contributed to Nora's Student Engagement Model (2002, 2003, 2006) by focusing on the lived experiences and specific latent constructs that had a positive impact on the students who overcame dismal circumstances associated with poverty after graduating from a Midwestern state's low socioeconomic urban public high school, completed a bachelor's degree, a master's when necessary, and finally a doctorate. This study demonstrated how the theory can be useful in explaining the importance of taking a closer look at the psychological experiences students engaged in prior to enrolling in college and therefore represent the pre-college characteristics (Nora & Lang, 1999) and the impact those experiences may have on the trajectory of the lives of the students.

Additionally, I discovered through this inquiry, the six major components that make up the theoretical framework, Nora's (2002, 2003, 2006) Student Engagement Model: sense of purpose and institutional allegiance, academic and social experiences, cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes, goal determination and institutional allegiance, and persistence (Nora, 2003) to be beneficial to the study of African American outliers who demonstrated persistence to remain enrolled in college, earning a doctorate degree, all when the odds were stacked against them.

Nora's Theory did not explain the theme, spiritual connection to God and the church that continuously emerged in the stories of success of each participant. I could squeeze it in with the non-cognitive outcomes, but this repetitive commonality among all the participants that report a foundational faith in God adds to the current understand of the success factors that contributed to these African American outliers. Therefore, this reported theme adds to Nora's (2002, 2003, 2006) Student Engagement Model.

### **Implications for Practice**

This study provided implications for educators, parents, and mentors including: spiritual and community members, extended family members, and any other significant adult of children and youth who are facing distal risk.

**Educators.** Findings from this study support this understanding that educators are teachers of content, but they must first be teachers of children. Each participant recalled conversations and interactions both positive and negative with teachers, counselors and principals that served as motivation to achieve academic success when they were their students. Also, those memorable moments and words were forever chiseled into the minds of the participants. Each interview served as a record of how the teachers made them feel. The hurt was apparent in the words used to express the pain caused by the educator, but the nonverbal physical observations were evident some thirty to forty years later during this study. Participants reminded educators of the importance of demonstrating sincere care and concern for students through both their words and actions. Educators have the power to influence or change the trajectory of a student's life. Nora's (2003) model discusses the importance of words of encouragement and validity that serve as support for students.

Academic and social experiences during the years the participants were in higher education contributed to their success. Even at the undergraduate and graduate level, all six participants were seeking a connection and a sense of belonging with support from the faculty. Because the participants were African American, through their reflection, they shared their heightened awareness of their own perceptions of prejudice and discrimination. Faculty must also be mindful of the lens through which nontraditional students perceive their surroundings, interactions with others, and especially their educational experiences.

According to the participants in this study, the findings suggest that teachers and faculty must keep teaching and learning expectations high and refrain from diluting the content. Nora's model (2005) reminds educators of the value of the cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes in the lives of students. Dr. Stanley dropped out of college after the first semester of college and didn't believe his high school teachers prepared him for the rigors of college. He didn't feel equipped with the necessary reading and writing skills to matriculate through college successfully. Dr. Stanley said, "My teachers failed me," when discussing his K-12 academic career. Additionally, most of the participants didn't recall school being challenging until they began their doctoral programs. Repetitive language throughout the interviews included statements like Dr. Katie's revelation, "I had to learn to study." The expectations for the students to recognize their own academic and intellectual growth should be taught by educators. Participants named educators who provided enrichment opportunities for exposure to the arts, critical thinking, scientific reasoning, diversity and acceptance, as well as other non-cognitive gains. These intentional exposures elevated the participants' persistence to reenroll and complete the degree being pursued.

Participants encourage counselors to look carefully at data and make connections with students early in the student's educational career, but especially in high school. This early intervention will provide guidance to the students to provide post-secondary options to include both college and/or career and the individual plans to get there and experience success. Dr. Jerry, criticized the counselor who was too late in having the college conversation with him; he didn't need her at that point as he had already taken the ACT, scored well and narrowed his college choices down to only two finalists. Dr. Jerry, like his classmate Dr. Katie both mentioned the need for this conversation to happen with the other students walking the halls who don't already have a plan for what to do after high school and need direction.

Findings from this study further suggest that these participants believe administrators should be held to the same standard as all the educators, but have the opportunity to hire effective and affective educators. Participants indicated that purposeful recruitment and retention of teachers and coaches who can relate to the students they serve without making excuses, should be a priority. The theme reported by the participants, spiritual relationship with God and the church, cannot be ignored. As educators, we must "walk a fine line" and shine light on this success factor that emerged. Separation of church and state has made it difficult to support a child's spiritual needs, but what once were rigid legal lines may be more blurred than we think.

**Parents.** According to the findings and analysis of data of the six African American outliers in this study and the usage of the Nora's (2003) model, family support and parental encouragement extracted a positive effect on persistence of these participants. These findings suggest that like educators, parents need to be aware of the power of their words on

the lives of their children. Participants stated that even uneducated parents can use encouraging words and demonstrate a sincere valuing of education and doing well in school. All the participants indicated a need for parents to keep educational expectations high. Each participant was the only child of the siblings to earn a doctorate degree, and in four of the six families, the only to earn a degree. Although the siblings grew up in the same homes with the future doctors, when the participants were asked about their siblings, they would share that the expectations were different for them, lower. Parents should want more for their children and encourage them to set goals to be better than their parents. Lastly, parents must get involved in the educational process and be present at academic and extracurricular events so that students know the parent is supportive.

**Mentors.** Participants expressed the belief that mentors may include but are not limited to family members, teachers and coaches, community members, and spiritual leaders. Findings suggest that mentors should be intentional while relationship building with all students, but especially disenfranchised and non-traditional students. Taking on the title “mentor” according to Dr. Stanley is serious, “...taking on the responsibility of helping to aid or assist in making someone else a better human being.” Dependent upon the needs of the student and how much distal risk the student has already experienced, will determine the size of the gap that needs to be filled by the mentor. Often, a mentor will need to fill the physical gap of an absentee parent or guardian who is unwilling or unable to parent their own child.

Each participant identified mentors who modeled their value of education and cast that vision and expectations for the mentee. Mentees recalled mentors spending time with them, advising them, challenging them, and providing opportunities and experiences similar to Dr. Sonny’s uncle who took him to the college campus, sporting activities, and the library

on a weekly basis. According to Dr. Katie, mentors may need to take care of financial needs of basic necessities like food, clothing, utility bills, and school supplies. Mentors are held in high regard by mentees, they seek approval from these role models who set the standard of success. Mentorship was evident in each of the participants' lives as one of the factors influencing their academic success. These mentees who are now doctors, now extend a hand out to mentor others. Their appreciation and devotion to their mentors further demonstrate the power of mentorship.

### **Implications for Research**

Stake (1995) identified a profound limitation stating that, "Many a researcher would like to tell the whole story but of course cannot; the whole story exceeds anyone's knowing, and anyone's telling" (p.240). Although the entirety of the story cannot be told, as the researcher in this study, I made it my responsibility to collect an abundance of data to better understand the phenomenon of the six African American outliers who agreed to participate in this study, and then be able to share the rich-thick descriptions of their lived experiences.

Numerous times, I would return to the data, review my notes, listen again to the audio recordings of the interviews, not wanting to leave out important information. I had to revisit Stake's (1995) quote on the limitation of qualitative research and remind myself that it was natural to want to tell the whole story, but it was not possible.

This study was not intended to generalize the findings regarding of African Americans who defied the odds, but rather explore the phenomenon of why and how these participants experienced success. My intent was to discover associated success factors from the perspective of the African American outlier who experienced academic achievement at the highest level. I can offer suggestions for other researchers to explore after me.

I was able to tell the stories of the participants and paint a picture of each successful African American's K-12 and post-secondary experiences at home and at school, but there was a desire to know more about each participant. Although there were several themes that emerged, each story was unique and worthy of additional investigation individually and some paired or grouped. My study focused on African American outliers who met the four criteria, and discovered there are many additional opportunities to investigate African Americans who have achieved academic success.

While triangulating the data there were multiple research topics that emerged that should be studied. Qualitative researchers could dig deeper with a narrative study on any of the participants, but those outliers of outliers like Dr. Katie who had drug addicted parents, and unlike the other participants, did not feel as though her needs were met growing up has so much more to share with educators, parents, and especially students on how to overcome distal risk.

Four of the six participants were African American males, and the literature review documented the startling high school graduation statistics focusing on this subgroup that has been the lowest achieving race and gender in America (Randle, 2012). A portion of this outlier model depicting academic success of African American males detailed the stories of four men who shared the four criteria for this study, three being the distal risk faced and the latter demonstrating the achievement of earning a doctorate degree. The African American men in this study were once boys; each faced a different social reality including obstacles in life and the educational journey. Dr. Stanley's case could extend into a more in-depth narrative study of going from being a gang member to being a scholar. Both Dr. Sonny and Dr. Jesse were collegiate athletes and recipients of significant athletic scholarships. More

research could be explored on the academic success of African American male athletes who persist and earn a college degree. Dr. Jerry had a severe stutter when trying to articulate his knowledge, Dr. Sonny was not reading and writing on grade level in high school, and Dr. Jesse identified behavioral struggles in elementary school; a study could focus on African American males who overcame a learning disability.

Additionally, a case study could also be explored focusing on the factors that led to four of the five children from Dr. Jerry's home earning a college degree. Both Dr. Katie and Dr. Jerry attended the same high school and were in the same graduating class; more research could be done focusing on one high school within the district.

I couldn't help but think of the possibility of more research about the influence of the African American church on the academic success of students and the positive influence on the family, as each participant shared the importance of their spiritual relationship with God. More time should be spent on the teachings and supports from the church that positively influence student resiliency and to be thankful for that spiritual relationship and feeling of connectedness and belonging to the church even when circumstances were difficult.

Three of the participants in this study attended an HBCU to complete their undergraduate degrees. Two earned their advanced degrees from HBCU's. Additionally, four of the participants were members of Greek Life or historically African American sororities or fraternities. Future research could investigate the success rate of African Americans who attend HBCU's and the graduation rate and persistence of those who are members of sororities and fraternities.

Five of the participants were proud to be actively engaged in extra-curricular activities while in high school such as band, cheer, and athletics. Based on this study, there

is evidence that student engagement and participation in extra-curricular activities while in high school positively impacted student learning, achievement, attendance, behavior and increased persistence. An investigation specifically exploring the impact of extra-curricular activities and student engagement on non-traditional students, especially minority students and those who experience extreme poverty could be beneficial.

Additional research in the area of the importance of mentorship and supportive adults on the lives of at risk youth and minorities could be explored to add to the existing body of knowledge about the impact of mentorship on a student's academic success. Empirical research interviewing identified mentors and significant adults identified in this study would provide more in depth information about purposeful mentoring strategies used and if there are other mentees they would identify as having a positive response to mentoring.

Dr. Jerry was specific and knowledgeable about grit, being a pediatrician. He stated, "My mom raised gritty children." Although none of the other participants mentioned the word grit during their interviews, they described it repeatedly in their personal traits and characteristics that allowed them to circumvent the obstacles that impeded the pathway to academic success. A Ted Talk featuring Dr. Angela Lee Duckworth (2013) helped to not only define and explain grit, but also the need for additional research on how to teach grit and build grit in children. Duckworth prefaces the definition with the following statement,

Doing well in school and in life depends on much more than your ability to learn quickly and easily. What we need in education, is a much better understanding of students and learning from a motivational perspective, from a psychological perspective.

After she and her research team studied persistent and successful cadets at West Point, finalists at the National Spelling Bee competition, rookie teachers in tough schools in inner city Chicago, and salesmen, Dr. Duckworth (2013) shared her findings of what made the most successful people different, “One characteristic emerged as a significant predictor of success...Grit is passion and perseverance for very long-term goals. Grit is having stamina. Grit is sticking with your future and working really hard to make that future a reality.” There is a need for additional empirical research contributions to the existing but limited body of knowledge about grit. Additional research about the evidence of grit in the lives of successful African Americans who have overcome barriers that are often associated with high poverty, urban environments who have gone on to earn a college degree would be beneficial to educators, parents, mentors, and students.

Finally, more qualitative research focusing on successful African Americans who persisted and earned a bachelor’s degree after growing up in poverty could provide insight into success of African American students in undergraduate programs. This same study could be duplicated, as there is not enough research on African Americans who achieved academic success. Focus should be on how and why those who secured academic success and attained a post-secondary degree were able to do so while facing distal risk.

### **Summary**

As I concluded this study about African American outliers, I realized that I was successful in reaching my goal to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of six African Americans who achieved success despite growing up in high poverty situations. These academically successful individuals attained academic learning, success, and achievement after graduating from a Midwestern state’s low socioeconomic, urban public

high school and demonstrated persistence and earned a doctorate degree in their area of concentration, becoming successful in their field. After spending time with the participants, I was able to gain a deeper, richer, more insightful understanding of the factors which led to their academic success.

Chapter I provided an introduction to the Black-White achievement gap and the rippling effect it has had on the lives of generations of African Americans. The past and present policies and unsuccessful attempts to remedy the achievement gap and how the gap has been reported were shared. Chapter I also discussed that the majority of research publications document the shortcomings of African Americans; therefore, there is a need to establish more positive empirical research investigating how and why certain African American outliers have been successful. As the researcher I justified the significance of the study focusing on the subgroup of African Americans raised in poverty, graduating from an urban low socioeconomic high school and going on to earn a terminal degree. The research questions served as a focus to the present study. The wording of the research questions was intended to set the stage for a qualitative case study filled with rich-thick detailed descriptions (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The significance of the study went on to provide pointed statistical information to support the need for such a study.

Chapter II provided an overview of the literature involving the African American achievement gap that continues to persist and the history of segregation and inequality, the standards and assessments that provide a detailed data picture of the continued gap, and the conclusion peaks with a numeric representation of the African American high achievers who have defied the odds. The literature review concluded with a description of Nora's (2003) Student Engagement Model and the six components therein.

Chapter III was an overview of the research methodology used in this study. The population, sample, data collection techniques, and method of analysis are discussed in Chapter III. It was necessary to be transparent in my understanding of my role as the researcher and the possible biases due to my subjectivity regarding the experiences of the African Americans who were participants. Revealing the bias awareness caused me to seek an objective position as an observer, collecting and analyzing data. I was purposeful to focus on credibility, validity, and reliability.

Chapter IV presented the case of the six successful African American participants from this qualitative case study detailing the narrative data collected. The participants passionately shared their stories of how they defied the odds through laughter and tear filled eyes. My “insider” status allowed the participants to build trust with me and quickly made themselves vulnerable detailing intimate stories of adversity and triumph. I distanced my own personal experiences from the data collected so that the unadulterated voices of the participants emerged.

Chapter V discussed the findings of common and divergent themes that emerged while answering the primary and sub-research questions through narrative data analysis. Chapter VI utilized the theoretical framework, Nora’s (2006) Theory of Student Engagement as the lens to interpret the individual factors and experiences African Americans believed influenced their educational success. Although this study is a case study, narrative language gave voice to the participants and additional quotations from the data collection were inserted so that voices of participants that would have otherwise remained silent, were amplified (Glesne, 1999). The final chapter also included implications for theory, practice and suggests recommendations for additional research to add to the existing body of knowledge. Finally,

implications for theory, practice and suggests recommendations for additional research to add to the existing body of knowledge. Overall, the African American outliers in this study demonstrated Frankl's (1992) point that, "human potential at its best" can "transform personal tragedy into a triumph" and "turn one's predicament into a human achievement." (p.116).

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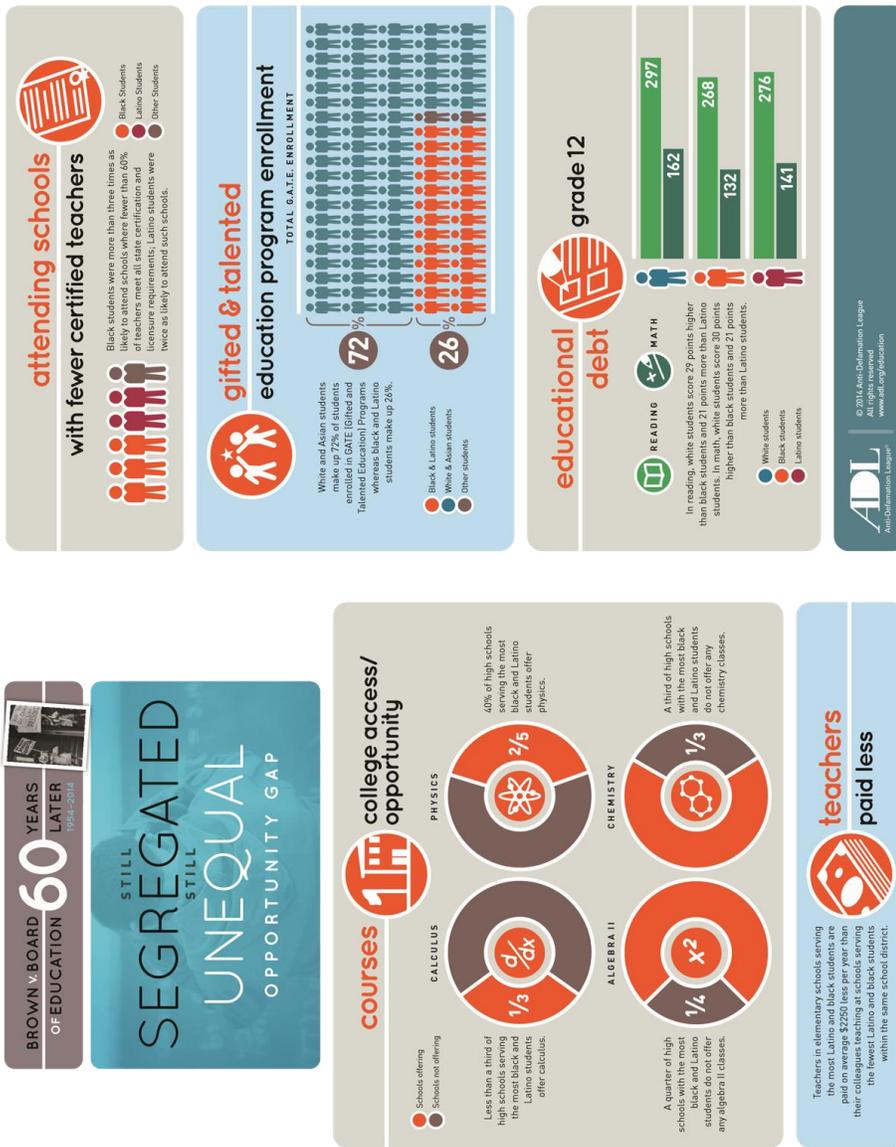
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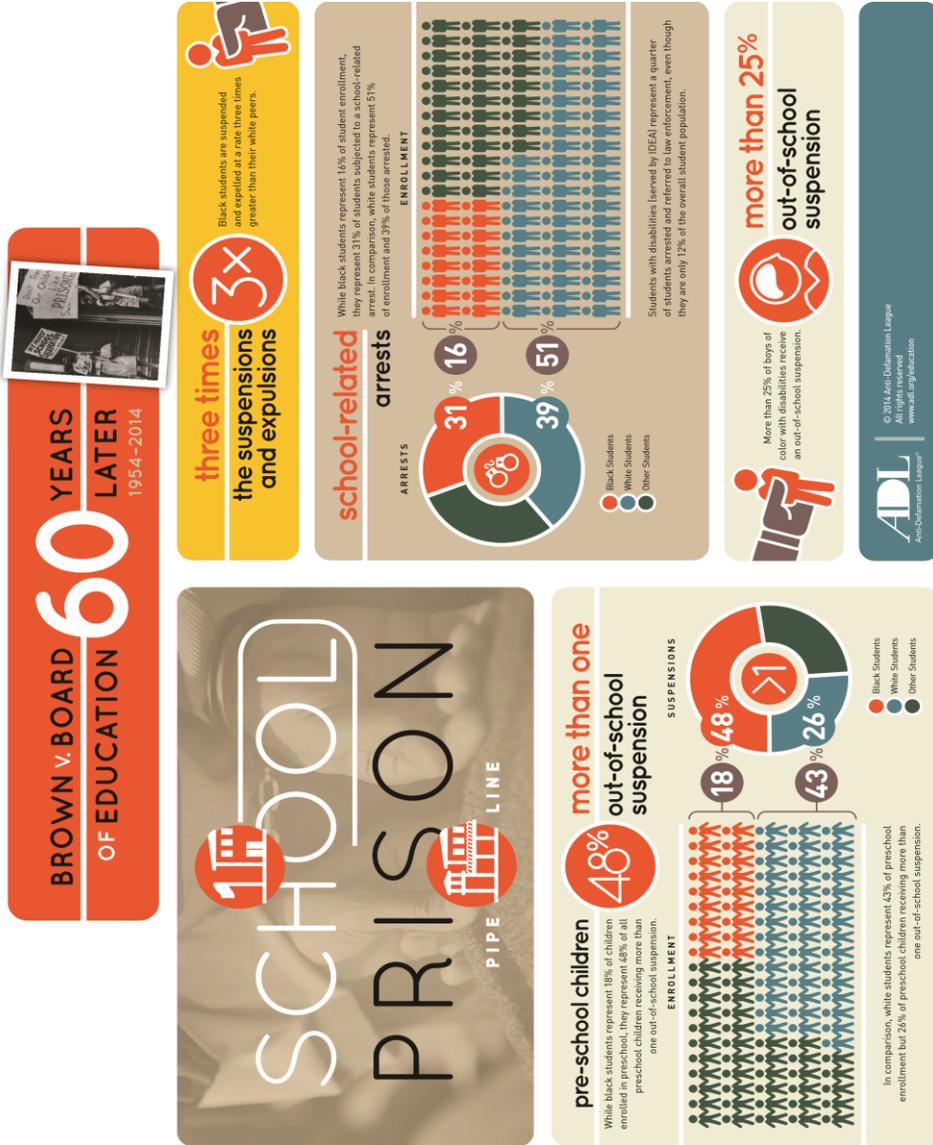
# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

### STILL SEGREGATED: STILL UNEQUAL OPPORTUNITY GAP



SCHOOL PRISON PIPELINE



## Appendix B

### Interview Questions and Protocol

Interview Protocol Respondent: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Introduction

Thanks for agreeing to participate in this study of African Americans who have defied the odds. As was mentioned when we set up the interview, I am researching this issue to fulfill the requirements for doctorate in educational leadership. My goal is to gain a more advanced understanding of educational environments that are conducive to academic success for African Americans. This interview will take about 45 minutes to complete today.

1. Please tell me about yourself, your family, and the home you grew up in?
2. Can you share with me your educational journey from elementary through high school?
3. How do you define success? Tell me about success you've experienced?
4. What challenges did you face? How did you overcome those challenges?
5. What support factors helped to encourage you in your educational journey?
6. What motivated you to go to college? What educational goals did you set for yourself?
7. What, if any adjustments and obstacles did you encounter in college? How did you overcome them?
8. What motivated you to get an advanced degree
9. How would you describe yourself as an individual? How would you describe yourself as a student?
10. What advice would you offer for educators who are working with high risk students? Parents?

## **Appendix C**

### **Interview Questions and Protocol**

Please take this journal with you and respond to the following prompts before our next meeting. Additionally, I have included the interview questions you answered today. If you would like to reflect or add any additional information to the interview question, please also include those thoughts and responses in the journal to discuss in our follow-up interview in two weeks.

#### **Journal Prompts:**

1. You grew up in an environment and attended a school where neither you nor your peers were expected to be academically successful. What made you different?
2. What advice would you offer to those students who have been identified as having distal risk?

## **Appendix D**

### **Interview Questions and Protocol**

#### Follow-up Interview Introduction:

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me again. Thank you for reading over the transcribed interview notes from the first interview and allowing me to observe you. Today's interview will last approximately 45 minutes as we discuss your journal responses as well as any other additional information you may want to include in the study.

1. After the initial interview and observation in your natural setting, would you please share your reflective journal with me?
2. Will you also share success artifacts you've brought with you today?
3. What additional information would you like for me to capture and consider in understanding experiences, perceptions, and interpretations related to being a highly accomplished scholar in spite of obstacles you faced?

## APPENDIX E

### E-mail Invitation to Participate in Study

Dear [Participant],

This letter is to introduce myself and my research. I am, Shana M. Perry, a doctoral candidate at Oklahoma State University. As partial requirement for the completion of a doctoral degree program in Educational Leadership Administration, I am conducting a study entitled “Defying the Odds: Stories from the Perspectives of Successful African Americans.” I want to gain more encompassing, realistic, and intimate understanding of how and why the sample of African American outliers were able to achieve academic success (completing a bachelor’s, master’s, and doctorate degree) after overcoming the challenge that may be associated with graduating from a Midwestern state’s low socioeconomic urban public high school. I am requesting that you be a participant in this study.

This study intends to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of six African American “outliers” in an effort to gain more encompassing, realistic, and intimate understanding of how and why they were able to overcome dismal circumstances that can often be associated with poverty. Data will be derived from interviews, reflective journal, observations, and artifacts.

#### Description of Procedures:

- Interview #1, initial interview not to exceed forty-five minutes (during this interview a reflective journal will be given to the participant to take),
- Reflective Journal will include two prompts the participant will be asked to respond to prior to the second interview. Additionally, the original interview questions will be included in the journal (to share any additional information or thoughts rekindled after the first interview).
- An observation in your natural environment not to exceed two hours will be conducted at an agreed upon time between the participant and researcher.
- Interview #2, not to exceed forty-five minutes, dedicated to the sharing of the reflective journal, artifacts the participant deems representative of success, and any additional information the participant would like to share.
- Transcripts from interviews will be e-mailed twice during the study to the participant for validity checks. (After Interview #1 and observation and again after second interview)

The qualitative case study intends to help educators gain a more advanced understanding of educational environments that are conducive to academic success for urban African American students. The investigation of the factors that have promoted the success of

African Americans in high-poverty, high-risk situations can inform educational leaders and policy makers as they seek purposeful steps to enhance success opportunities for marginalized individuals.

### **Qualifications for Participation in this Study**

To ensure you qualify as a participant in this study, you must be able to answer YES to the following questions:

1. Do you consider yourself African American or Black?
2. Did you graduate from a Midwestern state's low socioeconomic urban public high school?
3. Did you qualify for Federal Lunch Program? Free or Reduced Lunch?
4. Did you go on to complete a bachelor's degree, master's degree, and finally a doctorate?

If you answered yes to all four questions above, you qualify for this study.

### **Agreement to Participate**

Please indicate your preference to participate in this study by replying to me in the Subject header (Yes or No):

Yes — I would like to participate in this research study. Included in this response or in an attachment to this email is the following information: -preferred contact information that includes name and telephone number; - demographic information; - copy of my curriculum vitae and or resume; - agreement to provide signed consent to participate in the study and permission to be contacted to arrange the first face-to-face interview.

No — I would prefer not to participate in the research study at this time. (If this is your response, I respectfully accept your decision to decline participation in the study and offer my appreciation for considering my request. Thank you!—Shana) Please contact me if additional information is needed or if you have other questions about your pending participation in this research study.

Thank you.

Your partner in education,

Shana Perry

## Appendix F

### Informed Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY PROJECT

TITLE: Defying the odds: Stories from the Perspectives of Successful African Americans

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Shana M. Perry

CONTACT INFORMATION: 405.474.8514 [shana.perry@okstate.edu](mailto:shana.perry@okstate.edu)

You are being asked to volunteer for a research study. This study is being conducted at a location that will be in a quiet comfortable setting that affords privacy and convenience for you, such as your home or a library. You were selected as a possible participant because you are an African American with a doctorate.

Please read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to take part in this study.

#### **Purpose of the Research Study**

The purpose of this study is: The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of African American “outliers: in an effort to gain a more encompassing, realistic, and intimate understanding of how and why they were able to overcome dismal circumstances associated with poverty.

**Procedures** If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things: Your participation will involve answering questions related to your thoughts, feelings, and actions regarding your educational experience and the interview will be audio tape recorded. Each interview should take approximately 45 minutes to complete and the total estimated time of your participation is approximately 90 minutes. The location of the interviews will be in a quiet comfortable setting that affords privacy and convenience for the respondent, such as the respondent’s home, office or a library. There will be two interviews per respondent. The results of the research study may be published, but your name will not be used. Published results will be presented in direct quotes and summary form. Your identity will not be associated with your responses in any published format.

#### **Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study**

The study has the following risks: There are no risks beyond every day activities. The benefits to participation include personal reflection on key factors leading to educational success and building the body of research available specific to educational environments that are conducive to academic success for urban African American students.

## **Compensation**

You will not be reimbursed for your time and participation in this study. Voluntary Nature of the Study Participation in this study is voluntary. If you decline to participate, there will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to participate, you may decline to answer any question or may withdraw at any time.

## **Confidentiality**

The records of this study will be kept private. In published reports, there will be no information included that will make it possible to identify the research participant. Any written results will not include information that will identify you. Any research records with identifiable information, from artifacts to transcriptions of interviews, will be locked securely away in my home office, restricting access to only me or my advisor as necessary. Consent forms will be kept nearby in a separate locked cabinet. It is impossible that the consent process and data collection will be observed by the research oversight staff responsible for safeguarding the rights and wellbeing of people who participate in research. Audio tapes will be stored at the researcher's home office in a locked drawer. Tapes will be erased after one month and only approved researchers will have access to the records.

## **Audio Taping Of Study Activities:**

To assist with accurate recording of participant responses, interviews may be recorded on an audio recording device/video recording device. Transcriptions of our interviews will be completed by me while adhering to rigorous legal confidentiality standards. Participants have the right to refuse to allow such taping without penalty. Please select one of the following options.

\_\_\_\_ I **consent** to the use of audio recording.

\_\_\_\_ I **do not** consent to the use of audio recording.

**Contacts and Questions:** The researcher conducting this study can be contacted at 405.474.8514, [shana.perry@okstate.edu](mailto:shana.perry@okstate.edu) or [shana\\_educator@yahoo.com](mailto:shana_educator@yahoo.com). You are encouraged to contact the researcher if you have any questions. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Oklahoma State University – Stillwater Campus Institutional Review Board (OKSTATE-IRB) at 405.744.3377 or [irb@okstate.edu](mailto:irb@okstate.edu). You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records. If you are not given a copy of this consent form, please request one.

**STATEMENT OF CONSENT**

I have read the above information about the procedures listed here. I also understand and agree with the following statements:

I affirm that I am 18 years of age or older

I have read and fully understand this consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. I have asked questions and have received satisfactory answers. A copy of this form will be given to me. I hereby give my consent to participate in the study.

---

Signature of Participant Date

I certify that I have personally explained this document before requesting that the participant sign it.

---

Signature of Researcher

VITA

Shana M. Perry

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Thesis: DEFYING THE ODDS: STORIES FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF  
SUCCESSFUL AFRICAN AMERICANS

Major Field: Educational Leadership

Biographical:

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in 2018.

Completed the requirements for the Master of Arts in Early Childhood Education at University of Central Oklahoma, Edmond, Oklahoma in 2000.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education at Oklahoma City University, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma in 1997.

Experience:

High School Principal at Highland Park High School, Topeka, Kansas 2017

Middle School Principal at Summit Middle School, Edmond, Oklahoma from 2014-2017.

Elementary Principal at Orvis Risner Elementary School, Edmond, Oklahoma from 2012-2014.

Middle School Principal at Del Crest Middle School, Del City, Oklahoma from 2007-2012.

Professional Memberships:

Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated, 1996-Present

National Association of Secondary School Principals 2011-Present

National Association of Elementary School Principals 2007-2011