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## Making hope and hard work matter : what does it take to be an African-American male and a high achieving senior at an urban public high school

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Lashauna Cutts  
Making Hope and Hard Work  
Matter: What Does It Take to  
Be African-American, Male,  
and a High-Achieving Senior  
at an Urban Public High  
School?

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this exploratory, flexible methods study was to understand how high-achieving urban African-American male high school students are able to excel despite environmental factors faced at school, home, and in their community. The research questions that guided this study are: (1) what impact do the school, peer, family, and community environments have on the resiliency of high-achieving Black male youth who attend a school in a high poverty area? (2) What relationships and support systems shape the behaviors, attitudes, and aspirations of African-American male students who reside in an urban environment?

The sample pool was comprised of sixteen African-American/Black male students who were seniors at an inner-city public high school. Participation was in the form of focus groups where students responded to the researcher's open-ended, semi-structured questions and each other's comments regarding environmental factors that have significantly influenced their self-concept and academic achievement.

Major findings were the following: (1) Participants believed that they possessed the cognitive ability and willpower to do well in school and in their future. (2) They recognized education as the key ingredient needed to become and remain socially empowered, prominent, and successful. (3) Youth attributed their resiliency, or ability to bounce back under adverse circumstances and achieve, to the positive, supportive, and

structured relationships that they maintained with friends, school staff, family, and community members who verbalized and demonstrated their commitment to these youth.

MAKING HOPE AND HARD WORK MATTER:  
WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO BE AFRICAN-AMERICAN, MALE, AND A  
HIGH-ACHIEVING SENIOR AT AN URBAN PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL?

A project based upon an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2009

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This thesis is dedicated to the thousands of young African-American male students who are shining examples of success. When researchers decide to investigate about you all, oftentimes, your voices are muddled out, marginalized, and other-ed. May your voices be heard and recognized as powerful sources of knowledge, strength, and authenticity.

This thesis could not have been accomplished without the assistance of many people whose contributions are gratefully acknowledged. First, I want to thank my phenomenal five brothers whose examples as committed members of their families and communities serve as reminders of how important it is to highlight the narratives of Black male youth. To the 16 African-American male youth who served as participants in this study, I am greatly indebted to you all for sharing your time, energy, and wisdom with me. Thank you for making this significant work possible.

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Amen

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iii
CHAPTER	
I INTRODUCTION.....	1
II LITERATURE REVIEW.....	6
III METHODOLOGY.....	37
IV FINDINGS.....	44
V DISCUSSION.....	79
REFERENCES.....	94
APPENDICES	
Appendix A: HSR Approval Letter.....	103
Appendix B: Informed Consent for Participants.....	104
Appendix C: Informed Consent for Guardian.....	106
Appendix D: Brief Demographics Questionnaire.....	108
Appendix E: Flyer.....	109
Appendix F: Resource List.....	110
Appendix G: Semi Structured Interview Protocol.....	111

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

- Forty-two percent of the U.S. public school population is comprised of students of color.
- African-American students comprise 17% of the public school student population.
- African-American males comprise 8.37% public school students; yet their representation in special education classes is nearly twice that number: 15%
- If an African-American child is placed in special education, 80% of the time the child will be male; 85% of the African-American children in special education are male.
- Only 3% of the students placed in gifted and talented programs are African-American students; of the 3%, only 3.54 % are male.
- Fewer than half of African-American males graduate from high school in four years after entering the 9<sup>th</sup> grade.
- African-American students are three times as likely as White students to drop out of school and twice as likely to be suspended.
- In many of our nation's cities, there are more African-American men in prison than in college.

These gloomy statistics (Elementary and Secondary Civil Rights Survey, 2000; Kunjufu, 2000; US Department of Education, 2003, Whiting, 2006) are a part of what has come to be referred to as the “achievement gap”-the disparity between the academic performance of Black/African-American students and their White non-Hispanic counterparts. The gap is revealed in a variety of measures including students’ grades, standardized-test scores, academic grouping and tracking records, dropout rates, and college enrollment and completion rates.

The achievement gap is the theme of an abundant body of literature that exhaustively describes the social and academic problems facing young African-Americans. Whether culled quantitatively or through detailed ethnographic inquiries, the

bulk of the research focused on African-American students zeros in on the areas where these youth fall short. For African-American male students in particular, the typical take home message is that compared to all other students by gender and race, these males hold the position of number one in all of the negatives: they “consistently rank lowest in academic achievement, have the worst attendance records, are suspended and expelled the most often, are most likely to drop out of school, and most often fail to graduate from high school or earn a GED” (Wasunga & Christman, 2003, p.690). True, as a population “Black male students cluster at the bottom of the distribution of virtually every indicator of school failure” (Jordan & Cooper, 2003, p.198). Yet, given the hardship that many Black youth have to endure in school, in their communities, and in larger society, it is no surprise that their overall academic achievement mirrors the broad array of difficulties that confront them. The interplay of race and class has particular negative connotations for Blacks.

African-Americans currently comprise nearly 13% of the total U.S. population and they overwhelmingly live in large urban areas (US Census Bureau, 2001). In fact, over one-half all Blacks reside in large cities. Thirty-four percent of all black children live in poor families. Put another way, that means that more than 1 in 4 African-Americans under the age of 18 lives in poverty. Many of these young people grow up in cities marred by poor housing, inadequate healthcare, unemployment/underemployment, drug abuse, violence, and crime (Scaglione, 2005). Furthermore, African-American students disproportionately attend large, urban, comprehensive or “zoned” schools, and “many of these schools are located in communities that have relatively few resources and little social capital and political influence” (Cooper & Jordan, 2003, p.381). More often



than not, low socio-economic African-American students are taught by less qualified teachers and attend deteriorating schools that are racially and socially isolated.

Unfortunately, media outlets and researchers too often depict young black males as homogeneously dysfunctional, alienated, and threatening (Hunter & Davis, 1994). In fact, endangered species is a phrase that is inescapable today as journalists, reporters, and authors describe urban Black males in the United States (Jordan & Cooper, 2003). Rarely are the terms “competent,” “resourceful,” “aspiring,” or “motivated” used to describe these males or their performance in school (Barbarin, 1993).

The literature focused on the underachievement of African-American males in U.S. public schools has been obtrusive. However, not all African-American male high school students fail academically; confronted with a variety of obstacles and challenges, many young Black males still find ways to survive and excel in school (Noguera, 2003). Yet, to date, very few research studies have explicitly focused on this population. The current body of literature on African-American males who beat the odds and shine academically in high school is severely limited (Simons, 2003, Suskind, 1998). Therefore, the present study uses student voices to focus on the factors that keep African American students engaged and succeeding academically.

The purpose of this exploratory research is to understand how high-achieving urban African-American male high school students are able to succeed despite environmental factors faced at school, home, and in their community. The questions that guide this study are: (1) what impact do the school, peer, family, and community environments have on the resiliency of high-achieving Black male youth who attend a school in a high poverty area? (2) What relationships and support systems shape the

behaviors, attitudes, and aspirations of African-American male students who reside in an urban environment? Sixteen African-American male students in their graduating year at an inner-city public school in Connecticut partook in this study. Participation was in the form of focus groups where students responded to the researcher's open-ended, semi-structured questions and each other's comments regarding environmental factors that have influenced their academic achievement.

It is the intent of this study to add student discourses to the discussion on how to close the achievement gap. We know very little about the resilience, perseverance, and the coping strategies these individuals, whose lives are surrounded by hardships, employ to succeed academically. Deepening our understanding of how individuals cope with and respond to their social, cultural, and educational environments is a crucial piece of finding ways to assist Black males with educational attainment (Noguera, 2003). Gaining the stories of young black men, who are in the process of beating the odds so to speak, is also critical because in addition to identifying their individual resilience, these stories will also point to the culmination of "processes, mechanisms, and conditions that can be replicated across various school and family contexts" (Cooper & Jordan, 2003, p. 382). The perspective of African-American male students is valuable to other Black students as well influential in informing policy and practice because the students themselves can teach educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers alike about the structures, organizations, and practices that have led them to greater academic achievement.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Using an ecological approach, this exploratory, flexible methods study examines what roles the contexts of school, home, and community play in encouraging and limiting academically for high achieving African-American male high school students. The research questions that guide this investigation are: (1) what impact do the school, peer, family, and community environments have on the resiliency of high-achieving Black male youth who attend a school in a high poverty area? (2) What relationships and support systems shape the behaviors, attitudes, and aspirations of African-American male students who reside in an urban environment? In this chapter, a review of the literature provides a contextual framework for understanding the importance of the present study. The literature review is divided into three major areas; they are: (1) the achievement gap and African-American male students; (2) popular explanations for the achievement gap; (3) racism in urban public schools; (4) the educational context of African-American males. Within the area of “the educational context of African-American males”, several categories are explored and are presented as follows: (a) teacher expectations; (b) urban public school curriculum; (c) suspension and expulsion; (d) tracking.

#### *The Achievement Gap and African-American Male Students*

Although gaps in achievement exist across race/ethnicity, social class, and gender lines for all U.S. American students, the “achievement gap” is generally defined as the lingering gap in education achievement between African-American students and their

non-Hispanic White counterparts (Holzman, 2008). In addition to comparing discrepancies in scores on standardized tests, the achievement gap has been widely evidenced by comparing student graduation and dropout rates, discipline, special education, advanced placement inequities, and the relative numbers of students who are admitted to higher-status college, graduate, and professional programs. In extensive literature, African-American males have been identified as the subgroup with the most persistent lag. Recent research generated by the Schott Foundation for Public Education suggests that no ethnic group is primarily excluded from the educational system more than African-American males (Holzman, 2008). In public schools, African-American males “cluster at the bottom of the distribution of virtually every indicator of school failure” (Jordan & Cooper, 2003, p. 3). They are alarmingly overrepresented in special education classes and underrepresented in advanced placement; they have the lowest standardized test scores and high school graduation rates; they have the highest suspension rates.

For the 2005-2006 academic year, the Schott Foundation reported that only 45% of African-American male students enrolled in public schools nationwide graduated with their cohorts. In New York, Florida, and Georgia, three states with districts that have some of the largest enrollment of Black male students, African-Americans males enrolled in public schools are twice as likely not to graduate with their classes. Nevada and Florida graduate less than a third of their black male students on schedule and ‘Delaware, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, South Carolina, and Wisconsin graduate fewer African-American males with their peers than the national average” (Holzman, 2008). The National Center for Education Statistics (2001) reported that in 1998, African

American males accounted for 23% of all expulsions and 21% of all suspensions nationwide. Furthermore, Kunjufu's (2005) research indicated that only 27% African-American males identified as special education students even graduate from high school.

In the past two decades, the literature focused on Black male academic underachievement has been extensive. While researchers and media outlets are "quick to elaborate on reasons why African American males are consistently falling behind their white counterparts" (Fashola, 2005, p.1), any extensive examination of the segment of the Black male student population that is functioning well in school is remarkable absent from the literature. In fact, Ford and Harris (1990) examined the relevant literature on African-American gifted students and discovered that of 4,109 published articles on high ability youth since 1924, less than 2% addressed children of color.

The experiences of high- achieving African-American male high school students who attend urban public schools have received little attention. The paucity of research focused on this group coupled with the abundance of literature that offers deficit model approaches to understanding the achievement gap make it hard for many to realize that high achieving African-American males who attend urban public schools are a real and viable population. Sharon Fries-Britt (1997) shared that "the disproportionate focus on Black underachievement in the literature not only distorts the image of the community of Black [male students], it creates, perhaps unintentionally, a lower set of expectations for Black student achievement" (p. 556). While it is crucial to identify the causes and persistence of the achievement gap, it is also equally important to find solutions to the dilemma by learning from resilient students who manage to make the most of high school and excel despite the insurmountable odds they faced.

In order to appreciate the stories of young black men who fair well academically in spite of the broad array of difficulties that confront them, two crucial arenas must be addressed. First, popular explanations for the gap has to be examined; second, a thorough inquiry into the general conditions under which many African-American who attend urban public schools learn is needed. Accomplishing these two tasks initially offers the reader somewhat of an explanatory context as to “why Black male students [are] a segment of our population who are so conspicuously at risk”. These arenas provide significant indication regarding the degree of limitations African-American male students face (Jordan & Cooper, 2003, p. 199). What it takes to be Black, male, and a high achieving senior at an urban public high school is an accomplishment that is at once arduous and remarkable.

#### *Popular Explanations for the Achievement Gap*

Researchers have used historical, social, cultural, and economic factors to explain the achievement gap, and as Mano Singham put it, “favored explanations for the gap seems to depend on where one stands on the ideological side of the spectrum (1998, p. 9). One model, coined the “socioeconomic model” supports the view that economic disparities between Blacks and whites, which can be traced back to the legacy of slavery and other forms of oppression Blacks have suffered, is the primary reason for the underachievement of Blacks. Proponents of this model believe that once economic disparities between Blacks and Whites disappear, educational (and other social) disparities will “vanish along with them” (Singham, 1998, p. 10). However, this model does little to account for the fact that even when parents' income and wealth is

comparable, African-Americans still lag behind English-speaking, native-born, white students.

Those on the more conservative side of the spectrum, however, have used the “socio-pathological model” to explain the achievement gap. They believe that various social pathologies within the black community (lumped under the euphemism “black culture”) are at fault:

They point to unstable families; poor parenting skills; lack of drive and ambition; negative peer pressure and poor choice of role models; high levels of teenage pregnancies, drugs, and crime; and lack of parental involvement in their children’s education as the causes of a lack of interest in education among black students. (Singham, p. 10)

John Ogbu offered another popular explanation for the underachievement of Black male students. Ogbu is a social anthropologist whose work examines the American opportunity structure and its possible influence on the scholastic performance of Blacks (Mickleleson, 1990). Ogbu’s (1994) culturally specific theory, coined the ‘Oppositional Culture’, suggest that African-American youth have lower motivation and engagement because they learn that education is not a vehicle for opportunities of social mobility, and therefore develop negative attitudes toward schooling. In *Minority Education and Caste* (1978), Ogbu argued that African-Americans are involuntary, caste-like members in American society, and through this historic condition, they developed distrust for schools, and other institutions because these institutions do not deliver as promised to this minority group. African-Americans know that they face a job ceiling: [racist] practices that do not permit members of castelike minorities to complete freely

for the jobs for which they are qualified. Consequently “because the job ceiling faced by black adults prevents them from receiving rewards commensurate with their educational credentials, education is not the same bridge to adult status for blacks as it is for Whites” (Mickelson, 1990, p.45). Ogbu believes that African-American students associate academic attainment with a White cultural frame of reference, and see their participation in school-sanctioned activities as ‘acting White’. Thus, academic achievement poses a risk for these students because they are faced with the dilemma of defying their ethnic (“Black”) identity (and allegiance to the African-American community) in order to develop a strong academic identity. Ogbu therefore deduced that Black students consequently put less effort and commitment into their schoolwork as a way to maintain a positive sense of their ethnic selves and because they view their opportunity structure as severely limited compared to white students.

While several follow-up studies have indicated that the “the social structural context of the achievement [does indeed impact] the scholastic performance of students” (Mickelson, 1990, p. 45), some educational scholars have cited the danger in adhering stringently to Ogbu’s theory. Miller-Cribbs et al. (2002) suggest that Ogbu’s explanation oversimplifies the factors that lead to student underachievement and it fails to take into account the large numbers of African American students who do succeed. In addition, the theory’s popularity has added to the “negative expectations of African-American youth [that some teachers hold], resulting in self-fulfilling prophecy” (p.1).

The truth is that while the achievement gap as a phenomenon is indisputable, there is no clear-cut answer as to why it persists. Perhaps the most comprehensive explanation for the gap lies somewhere on the continuum of an intersection of the



ideologies presented. In addition, the underlying factors causing the gap will always vary with the unique characteristics of the student populations and school cultures examined. What is clear is that the majority of Black Male youth in this country face an enormous and complex array of social, psychologically, family, community, and educational programmatic factors that present as barriers to their academic achievement. In terms of the social environment, the conditions that poverty generates are some of the most commonly cited variables that put African-American male students at risk for academic failure. More African-American children are raised in poor, single-parent families than children of any other racial or ethnic group (Mincy, 1994). Almost half of African-American young men live below the poverty line, and 42 percent live in single-parent households (Griffin and Allen, 2006). Children of single parent homes are more likely than children from two-parent households to experience behavioral problems and to drop out of school, and research indicates that these problems are exacerbated when the child is male (Mincy, 1994). Many African-American children who live in poverty lack access to health care, adequate nutrition, and decent housing; they are exposed to substance abuse at a young age and live in crime-ridden neighborhoods (Noguera, 2003).

Inside the school building, lack of access to information and resources, low teacher expectation, suspensions and expulsions, academic tracking, and special education placements negatively affect black student achievement. In addition, racism (racist ideology, racist practices, and racist structures) continues to saturate the public educational system and has “cumulative psychic and emotional effects” for students and faculty alike (Berlak, 2001, p. 2).

### *Racism in Urban Public Schools*

Racism, which can be explained as “a system of advantage based on race” (Tatum, 1997, p.7), has been a pervasive part of this country’s history. Since the United States’ inception, a set of institutions and beliefs were created to advance the interest and status of White Europeans while oppressing the interest of people of color. In his 1944 landmark study entitled “An American Dilemma”, Gunnar identified white racism as the cause of what he called the “Negro Problem”. White people in the late 1930s and early 40s, he argued-and demonstrated-were in a position to make decisions about the lives of black people, and those decisions, largely worked to the disadvantage of African-Americans. African-Americans were virtually barred from high quality education and therefore handicapped in their efforts to rise from poverty. They were less healthy than their white neighbors were and condemned to shorter lives. Lacking influence in the “criminal justice system, many were imprisoned for activities that did not result in prison for whites. Black people were then not in the position to escape from what he called that ‘vicious circle’” (Holzman, 2008, pg. 44).

Fortunately, much has changed for African-Americans and this country in general since 1944, now 75 years ago. However, it is important to state the fact that generally speaking, African-Americans are still less physically healthy than whites, have shorter life spans, “are sent to prison at rates many orders of magnitudes higher, and often do not have access to quality education wherever there are large black populations” (Holzman, 2008, pg. 44). Today, racism still plays a sinister role in the way this country functions. As David Billing, an Undoing Racism trainer asserted:

You can't look at any institution or system in this country-the health system, social services, education, business and commerce, the legal systems-that doesn't dramatically display racial disparities, with Whites being the overwhelming beneficiaries and people of color, especially Blacks, being disadvantaged. (Scaglione, 2005, p.10)

As the public school system is the "sole compulsory institution in the nation" (Jordan & Cooper, 2003, p.197), it is not surprising that African-American males endure the most inequalities manifested in urban public schools. Educational racism is defined as differential access to educational opportunities based on racial or ethnic group membership (Jones & Carter, 1996). In urban public schools, educational racism operates in the form of attitudes, beliefs, and practices that contribute to the disenfranchisement of African-American students (Rozansky-Lloyd, 2005, p.596). Kunjufu (1986) cited the U.S. American public school system as the most flagrant institution that contributes to the destruction of the African-American boy because the treatment of Black males in wider society is often reflected in their treatment in education. As Anderson Franklin (2004) poignantly explained in his *From Brotherhood to Manhood*, the public education system often cultivates feelings of alienation and ambivalence toward formal education in African-American Male students:

What schools often provide for boys of African descent is a slowly nurtured understanding that being somebody is more directly attached to the peer culture than to the classroom. Our potential and ability are robbed by the climate in schools thoughtlessness...Such attitudes cultivated among black males by the school environment play into racially coded expectations that become self-fulfilling prophecy. Poorly

equipped schools, school environments preoccupied with behavior problems, mismatches between acquired, marketable skills and career opportunities, and the resulting awareness of our increasing marginality as young adults all contribute to the way society makes African-American men invisible and undermines their interests in learning. Many young boys of African descent fight a loss of faith, feeling that the outcome of education is not worth the humiliation. (p. 94)

*Educational Context of African-American Males*

Black students are more likely to attend high-poverty, low-resourced public schools than their white counterparts. The 2002 Harvard Civil Rights Report indicated that school districts across the nation have been “re-segregated” over the last two decades, and that the prospect of Black and White students attending the same schools is highly unlikely. The report also noted that the size of the minority population at a school is negatively correlated with available school resources (Griffin & Allen, 2006, p. 2). In 2003, Trent and colleagues’ research revealed that over half of students in high poverty schools districts were Black and Latino, whereas only 9% of students in low poverty districts were Black and Latino. A school’s resources-that is the funding that is available to the school to provide students with a comprehensive and quality education-certainly affects student academic achievement. In addition to impacting academic performance, more resourced schools also influence students success in the college application process; more resourced schools offer more advanced placement courses, place a higher emphasis on going to college, and have more graduating seniors that are directly college-bound than less-resources schools. Virtually all of the time, well-resourced schools come fully equipped with talented, caring teachers, well-trained and abundant support staff

members, protective and supportive administrators, and challenging curricula and high expectations for all of its students (Holzman, 2008). Low-researched schools, on the other hand, tend to have lower per-student expenditures, have “classes that are taught by less experienced and out of major instructors, and are starkly underfunded when compared to schools in wealthier, White suburbs” (Griffin & Allen, 2006, p. 2). Jonathan Kozol, White American author and social justice advocate, perhaps offered the best descriptions of school inequity in his publication.

In his *Savage Inequalities* (1991), Kozol provided a harsh look at basic ingrained inequality in the American school system and reminded the nation about the disparate learning opportunities in America’s public schools. He used detailed descriptions of schools across the country to reveal how these public spaces have become decisively raced and classed, calling attention to segregation and the disturbing lack of resources in schools serving Black and Latino students (Dickar, 2006, p.23). Through his analysis, Kozol poignantly described how public education in this country remains unequal to the extent that the majority of African-American and Latino students attend deteriorating school facilities that are both racially and economically isolated and receive instruction from teachers who often lack experience, motivation, resources, and/or enthusiasm to engage students in the learning process effectively (Kozol, 1991).

Indeed, the educational status of African-American males is generally “one riddled with characteristics of inferiority, low-academic achievement, low self-esteem, low-teacher expectation, over suspension, high special education placement, and tracking” (Trice, 2005, p.21). Teacher expectation, urban public school curriculum, suspension and expulsion, and tracking are all factors known to serve as significant

school environment barriers to academic achievement for Black males; consequently, each factor is given particular attention below.

### *Teacher Expectations*

“Teacher expectations of student academic performance and behavior are influenced and grounded in the beliefs instructors bring with them into the classroom concerning who will and will not achieve” (Trice, 2005, p.18). The majority of the research on teacher expectations suggests it has a powerful effect on student performance. Kunjufu (1993) identified teacher expectation as the most important factor in academic achievement. Obiakor (1999) reported that when teacher expectations of student behavior and achievement are inappropriately lowered or raised, it influences students’ self-understanding, self-love, and probably most important self-empowerment. There is also research that suggests that teacher expectations have the greatest impact on African-American students' achievement. Harmon (1991) reported that the academic performance of these students, more so than other students, is influenced to a large degree by the social support and encouragement they receive from teachers.

Oftentimes, teachers’ beliefs about students are erroneous and based on “characteristics outside of the student’s control such as race, ethnicity, religion, and gender” (Trice, 2005, p.18). Multiple studies have reported that some teachers’ expectations and perceptions of students are skewed by race, class, and gender, and the appearance of the students. Not surprisingly, lower-class students of color suffer most academically from low teacher expectations (Trice, 2005, p. 28). Kunjufu wrote, "For Black [males], the combination of being African American, male, low income, and poorly dressed makes them [remarkably] at risk" (1993, p. 32).

As early as 1988, Garibaldi examined teacher bias towards African-American student and reported that 60% of teachers believed that their African American male students would not attend college. Consequently, those teachers did not prepare their African American male students for college acceptance. Bahr and colleagues (1991) examined whether teachers' perceptions of difficult-to-teach students were racially founded. Teachers were asked to nominate a difficult-to-teach student out of a pool of equal numbers of African American and White students most in need of referral for psychological evaluation and placement in special education. The results indicated that teachers rated African-American difficult-to-teach students as more appropriate for referral than their white counterparts. A study conducted by Shinn, Tindal, and Spira (1987) yielded similar results. Shinn et al. explored possible teacher bias in race and gender and found that teachers were accurately able to identify pupils with reading difficulties regardless of the pupil's race and gender. However, the teachers referred a higher percentage of African American and male students compared with white and female students for special services. The investigators concluded that gender and race must be considered as factors affecting teacher-decision making. Terrill and Mark's (2000) study on pre-service teachers indicated that these future teachers expected higher levels of discipline problems, lower levels of parental support, higher levels of child abuse, fewer gifted and talented students, and lower levels of motivation in schools with African-American males.

Research indicates that there is a correlation between the race of teachers and their expectations for students. Kelly, Bullock, and Dykes's (1977) study offered empirical evidence suggesting that teacher bias in their study determined that twice as

many African American students were identified as behaviorally disordered than White students, with more African American students identified by White teachers as opposed to African-American teachers. Irvine (1990) found that White teachers have more negative expectations for African American students than for White students. Irvine's analysis of large urban school districts found that as the proportion of African-American teachers in a school district increased, the proportion of African-American students assigned to special education classes, suspended, or expelled decreased (1990).

Studies have also found that African-American students are aware of the low expectations some teachers hold for them. In the Metropolitan Life (2000) annual survey on teaching, 39% of students surveyed (N=3,961) indicated that they trust their teachers "only a little or not at all" because they do not feel supported by their teachers (p.184). When the data from the survey was disaggregated by race and class, minority and poor students indicated significantly higher levels of distrust. 47% of minorities and 53% of poor students stated that they trusted their teachers only a little or not at all. In Noguera's (2000) survey of 537 seniors at an academic magnet high school, African American males were least likely to indicate that they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "My teachers support me and care about my success in their class." Miron and Lauria (1998) found that African-American students feel that their teachers have lower expectations for their academic success and teachers fail to show concern for the success of these students in school. The results of the study of Phelan et al. (1994) indicated that African-American students felt that teachers lowered academic expectations based on cultural, linguistic, and ethnic factors rather than personal academic characteristics.



Low teacher expectation for African-American students is an incredibly disheartening limitation for these students because it helps to fuel a vicious cycle of failure. If students do not believe that their teachers care about them and are actively concerned about their academic performance, the likelihood that they will succeed is greatly reduced (Noguera, 2003). Teacher expectations dictate feelings, behavior, and interactions with students. When teacher expectations of student performance is low, instruction is likely to be “non-challenging and non-academic” and poor instruction fosters an inferior education, which virtually guarantees the academic underachievement that many teachers come to expect from African-American male students.

Negative beliefs and expectations about African-American males are also troubling because these “messages that have far-reaching consequences on their schooling and future life chances” (Trice, 2005, p.22). “Once negative attitudes toward students are established, other attitudes tend to be derived from those initial determinations” (Trice, 2005, p.22). Steele (1992) expressed that when a teacher lowers his/her expectations and accepts racial stereotypes, he or she undermines Black male student achievement, eventually causing the student to “dis-identify” with school and decrease his self-esteem and self-identity.

#### *Urban Public School Identity*

A critical issue that has surfaced from the ongoing debate on how to close the achievement gap is the important role that African-American educators play in the academic achievement of Black youth (Lynn, et.al, 1999). Pang and Gibson (2001) reported that, for students of color, “Black educators are far more than physical role models because they bring diverse family histories, value orientations, and experiences to

students [of color] in the classroom” (pp.260-261). Foster (1995) argued that because African-Americans educators are typically able to express cultural solidarity and communication with African-American students in styles that are familiar, these teachers are better equipped to recognize the historical, political, and economic realities that shape the educational opportunities and resources available to Black students.

Unfortunately, since the 1954, the year that the landmark Brown vs. Board of Education Supreme Court decision ordered the desegregation of public schools, there has been a 66 percent decline in African-American teachers (Kunjufu, 2005). While urban public schools across the country are increasingly becoming comprised mostly of students of color, America’s teaching force is becoming increasingly White (Cross, 2003). African-Americans currently account for 17 percent of this country’s total population, but only 6 percent of the teachers are African-American. Furthermore, Black males are only one percent (Kunjufu, 2005). Kunjufu wrote:

There are schools where there is not one African-American in the building!  
Unfortunately, if a male is present, he is probably the custodian, security guard, physical education teacher, administrator, or teacher assistant. The least probability is a classroom teacher and if so, an upper grade, middle school, junior high or high school. The chances of African-American students experiencing an African-American male in the primary or intermediate grades are abysmal.  
(2005)

In contrast to the lack of African-American male teachers, White female teachers make up 83 percent of the teaching force. There is obviously a national racial disparity between students in urban communities and their educational role models and this affects

educational effectiveness. For one, the racial mismatch deprives African-American students of the possibility of seeing themselves mirrored in positions of power in the classroom. Bell Hooks (1990) asserted that not seeing oneself positively mirrored drastically affects on the psyche. She wrote, “if we only view the margin as a sign, marking the condition of our pain and deprivation, then a certain hopelessness and despair, a deep nihilism penetrates in a destructive way the very ground of our being” (p. 342). The suggestion is not being made here that the fact that most urban schoolteachers do not share the same ethnic, racial, and socio-economic background as most of their students is primarily the cause of overall academic failure for Black male students. Rather, what is indicated is that “we must consider the enormous role that race plays in opportunities to learn” (Milner, 2007, p. 592).

Much has been written about the “lack of cultural congruence between African-American students and their classroom experiences” (West-Olatunji et. al, 2006, p. 4). Given the cultural mismatch between urban school students and educators, one might assume that teacher education programs are adequately preparing a largely White, middle-class, female teaching staff to teach in a multi-cultural context. Surprisingly, this is not the case. There are over 1,200 teacher preparation programs in the United States and ninety percent of them follow a traditional curriculum (Cross, 2003). For the most part, traditional methods and materials used in the classroom are “class-bound, European, male, Protestant, and racist” (Harris, 1992, p. 47). To the extent that teacher education programs do address teaching in multiracial environments, appended lessons on cultural competence seem to be what is offered. Cultural competence implies an intellectual grasp of difference and an understanding of the effects of racism and other “isms”. It is

highly personal work where people develop “their own sensitivity to the belief systems and the needs of various ethnic or racial groups” (Scaglione, 2005, p. 10).

Cross (2003) researched the efforts of an elementary teaching program to incorporate issues of race into the teacher education curriculum. The results of this year-long study indicated that teacher field experience potentially teaches passivity toward culture. Learned cultural competence lessons seemed mostly to benefit the White teachers who learned that their role in understanding racial dynamics is only to observe racial minority students behaviors. Teachers in training were not taught of the importance of connect with these students by teaching them in culturally responsive ways. For example, one of the lessons that these teachers (who were all White and were going to be teaching in urban schools) learned was to respect children’s language. After unpacking this tenet, Cross learned that respecting the language diversity between teachers and students met, for instance, that teachers should never publicly embarrass Black students who spoke “Ebonics” by publicly correcting them. Teachers admitted that they were not taught how to integrate language diversity into their teaching. They could not recall being taught “how to use the student’s culture, examining issues of the social production of language, or to use the English language as a tool of power and social control” (p. 206). Instead, as they understood it, their responsibility for language diversity was limited to successfully heeding a warning not to put the students down for the way that they spoke. Indeed, the soon-to-be-teachers in this study experienced a cultural discontinuity with their students. As Brown (2004) explained, teachers who make the most profound and meaningful improvement in their knowledge and understanding of culturally and racial diversity “have explored their personal histories

and value systems; developed an understanding, respect, and value for other cultures; and expanded their reference group membership to include others” (p.327).

Cross’s study obviously highlights the need for teacher education and curriculum reform around issues of race and culture. Urban public school curriculum continues to be largely Eurocentric and is a significant way that educational policies deny African-American students equal access to education. Again, the present curriculum taught at urban public schools is “neither affirming nor inclusive of African-American history or culture and is delivered in ways that may be incongruent to the way African-American males prefer to learn” (Harmon & Ford, 2006, p. 6). Much of what students are required to learn in school colors the messages African-Americans learn to internalize about themselves and about Whites, and public schools are one of the major institutions that foster in Whites an internal sense of superiority over communities of color. When students learn about U.S. American history in most public schools, they are taught that our history is of “White exploration, settlement, conquest, invention, and success” (Scaglione, 2005, p. 10). African-Americans students, on the other hand, internalize a sense of “intellectual inferiority” (Mattison & Aber, 2007, p. 3). They “look back at a history of slavery, segregation, oppression, and discrimination [in this country, and that is] reinforced by the daily indignities of poor housing, bad schools, inadequate health care, and unemployment/ underemployment” (Scaglione, 2005, p. 10).

Black males need to be taught that their history is one of survival and possibility and not one of inferiority (Milner, 2007, p. 243). Yet, federal legislation focused on “improving” urban education virtually ignores the supposition that school curriculum significantly influences black youth disengagement from school.

### *Suspension and Expulsion*

The motion picture industry and the news media play a huge role in shaping the perception that many White Americans hold of African-American male adolescents. One of the dominant stereotypes that the media displays concerning African American males is that they are hostile, angry, and prone to violence (Carby, 1998; Fujioka, 1999; Sue & Sue, 1990). Unfortunately, school faculty too often views African-American males as oppositional, defiant, rebellious, and unwilling to conform to behavioral standards as defined by schools. “Research indicates that because of this perception, these students experience suspension rates that are grossly disproportionate to their population constitution” (Trice, 2005, p. 350). A study of the status of African-American males in the New Orleans public educational system revealed how African-Americans are disproportionately negatively affected by the discipline methods of the public education system. According to the study’s results, although African-Americans males represented only 43% of the public school population in New Orleans during the 1986-1987 academic year, they accounted for 57.7% of the non-promotions, 65% of the suspensions, 80% of the expulsions, and 45% of the dropouts. Non-promotions in the primary grades indicated that of the 1470 first graders retained, 817 were African-American males; of the 768 second graders retained, 440 were African-American males; and of the 716 third graders retained, 438 were African-American males (Holland, 1991).

Even though African-Americans represent only 17% of the total school population, they account for 32 % of all suspensions and 30% of all expulsions (Skiba, et al, 2000). Over the past 30 years, African-American students, and particularly males, have consistently received the ‘short end of the stick’ concerning suspensions and

expulsions. Although suburbia has been the primary stage for the most violent school crimes this nation has known (Trice, 2005), African-American males are the group of students that most often receive harsh suspensions for infractions that do not involve violence or bodily injury. Research shows that there is little evidence between seriousness of offense and severity of punishment for Black students; yet these young men continue to remain at the highest risk for exclusionary discipline practices. Skiba, Peterson, and Williams (2002) study drives this point home.

Skiba and colleagues (2002) analyzed the discipline records of 11,001 students in 19 middle schools in a large, urban Midwestern public school district during the 1994-1995 school year. The results of the study indicated that students of color, and again particularly African-American male students, overwhelmingly received harsher punishments than their White counterparts for inappropriate behavior. Skiba et al. reported a “differential pattern of treatment, originating at the classroom level, wherein African-American students are referred to the office for infractions that are more subjective in interpretation” (p. 317). The authors highlighted a particular incident to underscore their findings: In Decatur, Illinois, there was a fistfight at a local high school. The superintendent recommended that the seven African-American students involved in the altercation be expelled from school for two years. In this same district, there was a fight involving White students where weapons were used. Yet, that same superintendent imposed less severe punishment on this group of students.

In 2000, Ferguson considered race and gender simultaneously in her study of discipline procedures aimed at Black boys. The school she studied viewed the dress and behavior of black boys as recalcitrant and oppositional and attempted to exert control

over them. Morris's (2005) qualitative research study examined the relationship among race, class, gender, bodily display, and discipline at a middle school. Morris investigated how educator assumption about African-American, Latino, white, and Asian students drove the different ways these students' bodies were disciplined, especially in dress and manners. The results of the study indicated that disciplinary action differed according to how perceptions of race and class interacted with perceptions of masculinity and femininity. Disciplinary focus at the school took three general forms. First, educators were concerned with "ladylike" behavior and dress, especially for African American girls. Second, educators were concerned with threatening and oppositional behavior and dress, especially for African-American and Latino boys. Third, many school officials assumed that some students, especially white and Asian-American students, required little guidance or discipline in their behavior and dress.

There is a major link between cultural clash, teacher stereotyping of Black students, and disproportionate rates of discipline referrals, suspensions, and expulsions. Carledge (2001) characterized clashes in proxemics (personal distance), paralanguage (voice, tone, pitch, speech rate), and verbal behavior (facial expressions, eye gazes) between ethnic minorities and White teachers as a cultural misunderstanding. Teachers who indulge in the stereotypes of African American males as maladjusted, threatening, and dangerous may overreact to perceived acts of defiance of authority if their anxiety is paired with misunderstanding of cultural norms, social interaction, and [fear]. By and large, African-American males are more likely to be suspended for ambiguous reasons such as "appearing threatening," where as White students are suspended for clear



violations such as the possession and use of guns, weapons, and drugs (Trice, 2005, p. 36).

What is perhaps most disheartening about Black male students overrepresentation in school discipline is that this number increases in cases where administrators rely on suspensions and expulsions as their primary form of punishment. According to Townsend (2000), higher rates of discipline referrals, suspensions, and expulsions have not been successful mechanisms to ameliorating the classroom behaviors of African-American male students. What does occur, however, is a domino effect where over-exercised discipline methods for African-American males lead to grade retentions, school drop-out, and academic failure, factors that do nothing more than to widen the achievement gap (West-Olantunji & Baker, 2006). Students who receive suspensions are “rarely provided opportunities to continue their school work, unlikely to be involved with extracurricular activities such as school clubs, community organizations, or athletic teams and are on the fast-track to entering the legal system” (Trice, 2005, pp .33-34).

### *Tracking*

In the simplest terms according to the Applied Research Center: Tracking or ability grouping is the practice of placing students in different classes based on perceived differences in their abilities. It takes a variety of forms, including remedial and special education programs, as well as programs for gifted and talented students. At the high school level, many school systems distinguish between college preparatory and vocational tracks. Tracking separates the “perceived” less academically gifted from the more academically gifted. Moreover, tracking practices especially include assigning students at the beginning of the school year to an ability group and keeping them within

that group regardless of their performance throughout the year (Harmon & Ford, 2006, p. 12). Today the majority of urban public schools (80%) still practice tracking in one form or another (Trice, 2005).

Not surprisingly, tracking has its roots in early 20<sup>th</sup> century racist efforts to separate the then-recent European and other immigrants, and Blacks, and Hispanics from “native-born White Americans of Northern and Western European descent, and to provide both groups with education commensurate with the perceived racial/ethnic differences” (Mickelson & Heath, 1999, p. 568). In theory, today’s tracking system does not formally group students into racial/ethnic and economic classifications to purposely ensure that different racial and socio-economic groups of students are provided with unequal educationally opportunities. The rationale behind tracking is that it narrows “the range of performance and motivation in a group of students; hence, making teaching easier,” but also preventing less able students from interfering with the education of those students who have superior academic ability (Trice, 2005, p. 24). Defenders of tracking vehemently argue that high-ability students languish in mixed ability classes because “it is nearly impossible, for example, for teachers to lead students through the plot twists of *King Lear* while simultaneously instructing in phonics” (Muir, 2007).

As facetious as this example might sound, some studies do show that homogeneous grouping promotes better performance among high-achievers. The problem with this tracking, however, is that it overwhelmingly and unfairly benefits White and Asian students; these students are vastly overrepresented in “high groupings” courses while African-American and Latino students are similarly overrepresented in low-ranking courses. Braddock (1990) study of the effects of tracking and ability

grouping on multiple samples of student groups indicated that racial and ethnic minorities are disproportionately tracked into lower-level ability groups in middle school and high school. Meyers' statistical study sought to determine whether poverty was a primary cause of the poor performance of Black students on the Minnesota Basic Standards Test. Passing this test was scheduled to become a prerequisite for a high school diploma in 2000. In a 1996 trial run in Minneapolis, 75% of African-American students failed the math test, and 79% failed in reading, compared to 26% and 42% respectively for Whites. The researchers found that, contrary to expectations, test scores were not statistically related to school poverty, neighborhood poverty, racial concentration, or even ranking of schools (except in the case of Whites). They did find that African Americans, American Indians, and Hispanics were underrepresented in the top ranked schools. African Americans were 4.5 times as likely to be found in schools ranked low in math, and twice as likely to be found in schools ranked lowest in reading. For both white students and students of color, success on the tests was positively correlated to how an individual had been tracked. Only 6.9% of students of color compared to 23% of white students had access to "gifted and talented" programs. This study suggests that tracking and the quality of the academic opportunities available in the school affects both the test score gap and the gap in academic performance generally (Berlak, 2001).

Mickleson and Heath reported:

Tracking functions as a major source of unequal opportunities to learn. Tracked academic courses in schools that enroll diverse populations of students reflect both social class and racial/ethnic stratification. Partly because poor and minority students tend to have lower achievement scores than do middle-class and

nonminority students, the former are placed disproportionately in low-achieving classes and nonacademic tracks. By contrast, middle-class students are disproportionately placed in high-achieving classes and college preparatory tracks. (1999, p. 569)

Although test scores influence tracking, these scores are only "one part of the criterion that educational decision-makers use when deciding students' track placements or course assignments" (Mickelson & Heath, 1999, p. 569). In addition, teacher recommendations, student characteristics (i.e. race and gender), and parental interventions in the placement process contribute the tracking decisions of educational gatekeepers (Mickelson & Heath, 1999, p. 569). Kozol posited that in today's American public high schools, it is apparent that in practice, tracking is often used as a means of racially segregating student populations despite of actual ability or test scores (1991). In fact, educational researcher Jeannie Oakes has showed that even when just similar test scores between White and minority students are utilized, tracking is still racially biased and inequitably distributed. Oakes contended that schools "judge African-American and Latino students to have learning deficits and limited potential" (1995, p. 682) far more often than they do White students. She reported that African-American and Latino students were much less likely than white or Asian students with the same test scores to be placed in accelerated courses: "while only 56% of Latinos scoring above 90 in National Curve Equivalencies were placed in 'high' groupings, 93% of White and 97% of Asian students who scored above 90 were placed in gifted programs" (p. 686). Other studies reveal that educational decision-makers oftentimes employ social constructed tracking placements made independent of student ability in a school.

Most literature on tracking has shown that screening processes for tracking begins around third-fourth grade. Harry Morgan, early childhood development professor, who has spend over 29 years training teachers and conducting research on classroom behavior and learning styles, shared about how tracking is linked to class, culture, racism, and linguistic differences between black male students and teachers early on:

Around third and fourth grade, there's a shift in the way that teachers instruct kids. In the early years, teachers encourage social interaction, but by the fourth grade, classrooms become more static, lecturing environments. This change in teaching approach, from an informal, learning-by-doing style to the more structured, sit-down-and listen setup, is toughest on male students, who tend to be more active than girls in elementary grades. And for black boys, a teacher's reaction to these high energy levels may be compounded by racism. There's often an undercurrent of fear or tension between Black male students and many White teachers, and even some Black ones [teachers]. This fear can be triggered over something as minor as a black boy walking around the room. On some subliminal level, the teacher is afraid to have even a very young black male defy the simplest rule. She's afraid his defiance will escalate. Since some teaches are likely to resent a student who doesn't seem able to sit still and cooperate, a troubled relationship can easily develop; the child might be perceived as a troublemaker or a slow learner [and put on a lower tracking course]. (Fremon & Hamilton, 1997, p. 116)

Ability grouping in elementary school often leads to continuous diminished school achievement for these students. Fashola shared, “when elementary Black boys

have unequal access to the curriculum, achievement inequalities in the later grades are not surprising” (2005, p. 138). A study by Simmons and Grady (1992) revealed that in the early grades, Black boys were already enrolled in low-level courses. In 1990, African-Americans made up 65% of the more than 105,000 students in Maryland’s Prince George’s County. Up until throughout the third grade, Black boys performed equally as well as their peers of all races on district-wide assessments in reading and math. Beginning in the fourth grade, however, Black boys experienced a sharp decline in test scores. The percentage of Black males in the top reading group dropped from 23% in grades 1 and 4 to 12% in grade 6. These declines corresponded to the ability grouping of Black boys in which they only had access to lower level courses. Oakes and Lipton (1992) studied the effect of race, social class, and tracking on opportunities to learn in mathematics and science. The researchers found that during the early elementary grades, the science and mathematics experiences of children from low-income families, mainly African-American and Hispanic students who attend school in central cities and who have been clustered in “low-ability classes”, differ in small but important ways from those of their more advantaged and white peers. By the time the students reach secondary school, however, their science and mathematics experiences are strikingly different.

Tracking placements significantly influence the equitable distribution of opportunities to learn. “The quality of education in ‘low’ ranked tracks tends to be inferior to others; more low-ranked tracks focus on drill and rote memorization, while ‘higher-order thinking’ is often reserved for high-ability classes (Mallery & Mallery, 1999, p. 14). In addition, low-level courses often lack the content-certified teachers and

sophisticated educational equipment that high-level courses do. Minority and poor White students are often permanently fixed into low-level ability groups that “rarely change between the 7th and 12th grades” (Mallery & Mallery, 1999, p. 13), because at the high school level, students infrequently move between college prep, general, or vocational educational tracks. Hence, “school policies and practices may in fact be embracing a culture that maintains racial, ethnic, and social class segregation within schools” (Yonezawa, Wells, & Serna, 2002); unfortunately, what happens is that the students tracked into the lowest classes-poor urban Black males-eventually become disengaged and have a higher likelihood to drop out of school before graduation (Trice, 2005).

#### *Summary*

As can be gathered from the above examination of the literature, typical schooling experiences for most urban African-American male students disproportionally puts them at risk for academic failure. They are the young people that most often experience minimal teacher expectations, tracking into the lowest classes, victimization by negative stereotypes, inadequate representations of their successes, and assimilation into an educational system that devalues their cultural strengths (Stelle, 1997). Unfortunately, instead of serving as sources of hope and opportunity, schools are often sites of marginalization and stigmatism for many African-American male youth (Noguera, 2003). A myriad of studies have documented the risk variables and cultural factors in understanding African-American male students’ academic performance. However, in order to again a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that contribute to and limit African-American male academic attainment in urban high schools, we need the voices of Black youth.

What high achieving African-American male students have to say about the education they receive and what factors impact their school performance should “hold particular importance considering Black male youth overrepresentation in the nation’s most impoverished schools” (Griffin & Allen, 2006, pg.2). As these students have achieved despite the odds, their voices may “generate novel insights and interventions for boosting school success that have been overlooked by education experts and researchers” (Tucker et.al, 2000, p.1). What can we learn from the young Black men that have made it to their senior year at an inner-city high school? How can an understanding of their experiences help other African-American male students succeed in urban high schools? What did these young Black men hope to get out of high school? What did students actually get? What did they fear about coming to high school? What factors do they believe account for the drastic differences in academic scores between black and white students? What do they think shapes the pattern of school success and school failure?

The present study uncovers the answers to some of these questions in an attempt to appreciate the perseverance and success of high-achieving African-American male students. As has been previously stated, studies centered on the actual opinions and experiences of young black males-the part of the student population that gets the most negative coverage-are in short supply. Likewise, studies that appreciate the academic successes of African-American male students are remarkable absent from education and social work literature.

Some have attributed the academic success of high-achieving African-American students to their resilience (Griffin & Allen, 2006). Resilience is best defined as an individual’s ability to adapt successfully to risk situations-difficult, challenging, or



threatening environments and experiences. Wang and colleagues (1995) define educational resilience as “the heightened likelihood of success in school and in other aspects of life, despite environmental adversities, brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences (p.5). Resilient people have the sustained ability to bounce back and excel in the face of adversity, and this “bounce-back” dynamic is the result of a consolidation of environmental factors, experiences, and programs that reduce risk.

Similarly, in the following chapter, direct attention is devoted to the environmental factors, experiences, and programs that reduce risk and increase resilience for the talented Black male students who managed to translate their struggles into academic success. Therefore, instead of simply identifying and listing characteristics of resilient individuals, this study explores and addresses the environments and factors that enhance resilience in order to gain a better understanding of the experiences of black male high-achievers who attend an urban public school.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### *Study Purpose and Questions*

The purpose of this exploratory, flexible study was is to understand how high-achieving urban African-American male high school students are able to excel despite environmental factors faced at school, home, and in their community. The major research questions that guided this study are: (1) what impact do the school, peer, family, and community environments have on the resiliency of high-achieving Black male youth who attend a school in a high poverty area? (2) What relationships and support systems shape the behaviors, attitudes, and aspirations of African-American male students who reside in an urban environment?

#### *Researcher's Position*

Graham and Anderson (2008) recently conducted a case study investigation where they examined the interplay between ethnic and academic identity for three academically gifted African American male high school seniors in a predominantly African-American urban school. Before conducting the research, the authors thought it necessary to describe their position, as they believed it might have some influence over the interpretation of the results. Similarly, this researcher deemed it necessary to present her position as it addresses her potential biases. The researcher is an African-American woman who was born in the 1980s and reared in the inner city borough of the Bronx, New York. From early childhood to the end of high school, the researcher attended

under-resourced large urban schools in high-poverty school districts with virtually all students of color. Yet, she describes her academic experiences as rich, challenging, and somewhat comprehensive. The term “somewhat comprehensive” was chosen because although the school curriculum was rigorous, and advanced placement and honors classes were available, course material was presented in a very Eurocentric manner. Moreover, seldom were the issues of racism and social classism addressed as real factors that influenced African-American academic achievement. Instead, school administrators, teachers, and other support staff often simply remarked about (or students read about) how poorly African-Americans achieved academically as a race.

### *Sample*

#### *Institutional Site*

This study focuses on a group of African-American male students attending Buchanan high school (a pseudonym), an urban public school located in the inner city of Norwood (a pseudonym), Connecticut. As a city in the nation’s second wealthiest state, Norwood is peculiar in that its relatively small size makes it virtually possible for the abject poor and the rich to be neighbors. Norwood is home to a major Ivy league University and the city’s rich areas of course include the neighborhood surrounded this University. However, the “hoods” are not far off and many times lie juxtaposed to the city’s rich sections. One out of every 4 of Norwood resident’s lives in poverty and 1 out of 3 of the city’s youth under the age of 18 is poor (Lind et. al, 2005). In addition, unemployment, underemployment, and the lack of decent-paying jobs at the low-and semi-skilled levels represent growing challenges for a city in the midst of continued economic transition (Lind et. al, 2005). Nearly 1 in 10 of Norwood residents were

unemployed in 2003, compared with 6% in Connecticut and across the United States. Also in this same year, in Norwood's poorest communities, more than 1 in 4 young people aged 16 to 24 who sought employment were unable to find it, and this contributed greatly to this city's poverty and delinquency among youth (Lind et. al, 2005). Recent statistics show that in Buchanan high school's surrounding community, 40% of the population over 25 years old has obtained a college degree, and the median household income is \$29,253.00. Twenty-three percent of the community owns their place of residence while the majority (77%) rent ([www.publicschoolreview.com](http://www.publicschoolreview.com)).

This school was chosen as a research site namely because of its standing as a large urban public institution in a city where issues of poverty are very prevalent and because the school's student population consisted mostly of the racial background necessary for this research. At 1,030 students, the student population at Buchanan high is 88% African-American, 10% Hispanic, and 2% White. The majority of the students are from families of low to limited socioeconomic status: 73% of the students are eligible for free lunch and another 11% are eligible for reduced lunch. Labeled as a "zoned" or comprehensive high school, Buchanan high was identified by the state as an underperforming school. In fact, in a recent John Hopkins study (2007), Buchanan was included in a report of a cluster of Norwood schools that are considered overcrowded "dropout factories" where up to 50% of a class may drop out by graduation (Heintz, 2006). The study also indicated that the most inspiring part of the day for many students is athletics practice.

### *The Context and Participants*

The researcher employed purposive methods to identify students appropriate for this study (Griffin & Allen, 2006). Students were selected based on race and level of academic achievement. A purposive sample was necessary to allow for the best insight into this study's research questions (Griffin & Allen, 2006). Participants were culled from the Young Men's Leadership Program (YMLP), a mentorship program that matches collegiate and professional men with adolescent male students at Buchanan high. The organization was originally formed in 1998 by a group of students, but went inactive for several years. Fortunately, in 2006 a Buchanan high school alum, who is also a product of the YMLP and a four-year college graduate, reestablished the group with the help of current and former college students. The principles of the YMLP are education, fortification, maturity, and determination. Through this program, young men within the inner city are able to foster positive relationships with fellow students and college-aged men who can serve as direct mentors and role models. Within the structure of the program, young men are able to discuss some of the issues that plague the communities that they live in and to work towards enhancing their own lives through community service, college preparation, and social awareness discussions. With its focus on cultural identity development as a means towards academic motivation, civic participation, and self-determination skills, the YMLP operated much like a rites of passage program:

Central in the development of rite of passage programs is the provision of appropriate and positive images of African-American male manhood via African-American male teachers, mentors, and other models. The basic premise is that African-American boys have a greater opportunity to thrive when receiving

culturally based interventions that legitimize their own cultural, family, and community experiences. (West-Olantunji et. al, 2006, p. 5)

The YMLP meets twice a week for 2 hours after school in the Buchanan school building and students voluntarily participate. The average participation duration for students in the YML group is 2 years.

Young men for this study were recruited with the assistance of the YMLP facilitators who served as liaisons between the students and the researcher. Data on these students was provided by the students and verified by the facilitators of the YMLP. Consent forms were obtained from the students and, in the case that it was necessary, their guardians also. Participants were chosen for this study because they met the following criteria: (1) racially, they identified as at least half African-American/Black. The terms “African-American” and “Black” are used interchangeably in this study and are defined as a student who has at least one parent who self-identifies as African-American/Black and who himself identifies as at least half African-American/Black; (2) they were high-achieving students. A “high-achiever” is defined as students with an overall high school Grade Point Average (G.P.A.) of at least a B (or 3.0) or 80%; (3) they were between the ages of 17-19 years old; (4) home-school continuity: they lived in the same urban community as Buchanan high school.

#### *Data Collection*

This exploratory flexible methods study required the use of qualitative methods to collect data. Student participation in this research study was in the form of participation in a focus group. The focus group format was strategically chosen as the means of collecting data because this format allows the researcher to study people with commonalities in a

more natural setting, thereby allowing the researcher to yield the most information from subjects in a personally non-threatening way. Focus groups allow respondents to talk freely and to choose descriptive words significant to them. Luntz (1994) wrote, "People will reveal their innermost thoughts only to those they believe share a common bond" (p.2). Two focus groups were held at Buchanan high, and each group lasted for two hours and was videotaped at the program site during regular business hours. The first group consisted of six participants and the second group consisted of ten participants. A semi-structured protocol was used in the focus groups (see Appendix G). The researcher asked each group specific open-ended questions that were mostly based on a review of the literature regarding the academic success of urban African-American youth. Student responses to general questions (like "how do your peers feel about your academic achievement?") guided the researcher in the direction of more specific follow-up questions intended to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' point of views.

The time allotted for each focus group (2 hours) gave the researcher time to offer the students pizza and soda at the beginning of each group and have students fill out a brief demographics questionnaire (Appendix D) at the end of the group. The researcher designated approximately one and a half hours to the focus group questions. Twenty minutes was used as time for the students eat and for the researcher introduce the study and focus group format. Finally, the researcher used the last ten minutes to answer any questions, debrief and handout a list of referral sources, and to have the students answer the demographic questionnaire.

Only the researcher conducted the focus groups and permission to video record groups was requested and obtained prior to recording. To maintain student

confidentiality, a number of processes were employed. Participants were informed of their rights and privacy in the Informed Consent (see Appendices B & C for Participant Informed Consent and Guardian Informed Consent), and Informed Consents were stored separately from the video recordings. Only the researcher had access to and transcribed the video recordings in a private setting. During the transcription process, each student's name was changed. In addition, the names "Buchanan high school" and the city of "Norwood" are used as pseudonyms in lieu of the true name of the urban public high school and the name of the city in Connecticut.

All potential harmful effects of participation in the focus groups were minimized, but clearly indicated in the Informed Consent. The Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review committee (of the school's Institutional Review Board) approved this research project (see Appendix A). This study sought to examine what factors have contributed to as well as hindered student academic attainment for high achieving African-American male students. With that said, there was the possibility that part of students' narrative would include bad-mouthing of certain school staff, relatives, community organizations, and other peers. As all of the research participants attended the same school, the risk was that hearing negative talk about people and institutions with which they have intimate contact might cause distress. As a provision for dealing with this potential harmful effect, the researcher supplied participants with a list of resources in their area (see Appendix F). It was also made clear to participants that any questions asked served to initiate open-ended discussion and that students did not have to answer or respond to any questions/comments that they did not feel comfortable doing so.



### *Data Analysis*

The video recordings of both of the focus groups were transcribed entirely and as close to verbatim as possible. To maximize the yield of information from the data and to ensure accuracy, the researcher watched the videotapes from each of the focus group to transcribe and then watched the videos while reading through the transcription. The researcher used two types of qualitative coding procedures to analyze the transcripts from the focus groups (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The initial type of coding, known as open coding, involved placing conceptual labels on selected segments of transcripts to represent the preliminary themes emerging from the data. The researcher read the transcripts several time while highlighting comments or phrases that were thematic and representative of the participants experiences. During this process, highlighted statements were summarized on the right of the margins of the transcripts. Thereafter, during the axial coding process, conceptual labels from open coding where grouped under broader categories resulting in the generation of several major themes. “The themes were chosen based on consistency between participant responses, answers that directly addressed the research questions and reactions that were poignant” (Stovall-Shepard, 2007, p. 29). Domains of meaning from clustered summary statements included participant quotes associated with each category. This process of “specifying the relationship among the many categories that emerged resulted in the conceptualization of categories selected as the core” (Strauss, 1987, p.34).

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

#### *Introduction*

The purpose of this exploratory, flexible methods study was to understand how high-achieving urban African-American male high school students are able to succeed despite environmental factors faced at school, home, and in their community. The research questions that guided this study are: (1) what impact does school, peers, families, and communities have on the resiliency of high-achieving Black male youth who attend schools in a high poverty area? (2) What relationships and support systems shape the behaviors, attitudes, and aspirations of African-American male students who reside in an urban environment?

This chapter contains the findings from two focus groups conducted with African-American male students at an urban public high school. In each focus group, participants were asked a minimum of fifteen to a maximum of twenty questions. The researcher transcribed both focused groups entirely and concepts from all responses were coded into four major thematic categories based on the most popular factors that influenced academic achievement in this particular urban public high school. They are: student self-concept; the role of family; the school context; the role of peers; the Norwood community. The findings will be presented as follows: (1) demographic data; (2) characteristics of high-achieving Black male high school seniors; (3) the school context; (4) the role of peers; (5) the Norwood community. Within the category of “school

context”, several sub categories emerged and are presented as follows: (a) freshman-year; (b) the role of extracurricular activities, namely sports; (c) student relationships to teachers/ other high school staff members; (d) school resources.

### *Sample Characteristics*

Sixteen high-achieving African-American male students participated in this study (see Table 1). All participants were in twelfth grade at the same public high school (identified as “Buchanan high school”) in a city in Connecticut (identified as “Norwood”). All research participants were members of the Young Men’s Leadership Program (YMLP), a mentorship program that matches collegiate and professional men with adolescent male students at Buchanan high. Fifty percent (n=8) of the students were 17 years old at the time of the study and the other 50% (n=8) were 18 years old. The family incomes of all these youth varied but as most of them qualified for free or reduced lunch according to the high school’s district area, the majority of the students are likely to be economically disadvantaged. All (100%; n=16) of the students reported that they resided in nuclear families; extended family members were not indicated in any of the youth’s households. Thirty-eight percent (n=6) of participants resided in a two-parent household. Of this 38%, 6% (n=1) lived with a father and a stepmother; 25% (n=4) lived with both parents and two siblings; 6% lived with both parents and three siblings. Fifty-six percent (n=9) of the study’s participants lived in a single-parent household. Of this 56%, 13% (n=2) lived solely with their fathers; 6% (n=1) lived solely with mom; 13% (n=2) lived with their mothers and one other sibling; 19% (n=3) lived with their mothers and two other siblings; 6% (n=1) lived with mothers and three other siblings. Six percent

(n=1) of the study's participants did not live with either parent at all, but resided in a household with four siblings.

Table 1  
Study Participants

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Grade Point Average</i>	<i>Two-Parent Household (Y/N)</i>	<i>Family Composition (including number of persons residing in home)</i>
<b>1. Randy</b>	18	African-American	3.5	Y	6-Youth, mother, father, two brothers, one sister
<b>2. Corey</b>	17	African-American	3.5	N	3-Youth, mother, sister
<b>3. Jabari</b>	17	African-American	3.4	N	2-Youth, father
<b>4. Raymond</b>	17	African-American	3.3	N	4-Youth, mother, two sisters
<b>5. Jonathan</b>	18	African-American	3.3	N	2-Youth, father
<b>6. Anthony</b>	18	African-American	3.3	N	4-Youth, mother, two brothers
<b>7. Gieno</b>	17	African-American	3.2	N	3-Youth, mother, sister
<b>8. Justin</b>	17	African-American	3.2	Y	5-Youth, mother, father, brother, sister
<b>9. Ernest</b>	17	African-American	3.2	N	2-Youth, mother
<b>10. Michael</b>	18	African-American	3.1	N	4-Youth, mother, two brothers
<b>11. Gerald</b>	18	African-American	3.1	Y	5-Youth, mother, father, two brothers
<b>12. Manuel</b>	17	African-American/Puerto Rican	3.1	Y	5-Youth, mother, father, two brothers
<b>13. Robert</b>	18	African-American	3.1	Y	5-Youth, mother, father, brother, sister
<b>14. George</b>	18	African-American	3.0	N	5-Youth, two brothers, two sisters.
<b>15. Andre</b>	18	African-American	3.0	N	5-Youth, mother, two brothers, one sister.
<b>16. Romeo</b>	17	African-American	3.0	Y	3-Youth, father, stepmother.

\*The participant names have been changed to protect their identities.

### *Characteristics of High Achieving Black Male High School Seniors*

Perhaps the most prominent characteristic that all the youth involved in this study had in common was their resilience. In each youth's narrative was embedded kernels of struggle and triumph. With life experiences plagued by the usual suspects of the poor inner city, of which poverty, drugs, violence, and gangs are just to name a few, these youth managed to overcome the ills of unfortunate circumstances and become shining examples of accomplishment. In addition to revealing the protective factors operating in their lives that helped to explain their survival and academic success in school, students' comments also highlighted a number of common personal characteristics that helped them to beat the odds or bounce back under adverse circumstances and achieve.

The high-achieving students in this study possessed an internal locus of control; they believed that the forces shaping their lives were largely within their control. Researchers have cited an internal locus of control as a protective factor for resilient urban youth. Resilient urban youth are active in their attempts to overcome adverse situations because they believe that they can control the outcomes of their living. All youth (n=16) believed that they had the cognitive ability to do well in school and in their future. Furthermore, more than any circumstance or anyone else, students believed that they themselves could present as the only major impediment to their academic success. Students understood that achievement could not be met without coupling a strong belief in oneself with diligent hard work. In responding to a question about why it is that more African-American male students do not achieve at high levels, Gieno shared:

“If you do what you gotta do, it's no reason why you can't get into a good college and start to carve out a good life for yourself. But if you want to lag and just hang around then you gonna miss opportunity and it's your fault because you didn't grab

it. Then you gonna be regretful like, 'maybe I should have did some more work and went to school more.' A lot of these kids can be in the same places that we are, but it's gonna be harder for them now then it would have been before because they let so much time lag without them putting that much time and effort in".

Many of the young men in Gieno's focus group nodded in agreement to his words because their experience in school had taught them his words were true. Virtually all of the study's participants (n=14) had experienced periods of underachievement during their high school years and prior to that. Although they all possessed an overall G.P.A. of 3.0 or higher, many of the students shared that they had not always worked to their fullest potential and lamented that fact. Ernest shared:

"I gotta tell you that my focus wasn't always on the books and now I regret it. If I had been on top of my schoolwork since freshman-year than I wouldn't have had to struggle with college applications. But you live and you learn. Now that I am in my senior year, my focus is on going to college and my schoolwork is most important. I think that I got caught up in chasing girls my first year in high school. Now I realize that girls will come. When I first came to high school I was like I gotta bag every girl that I see, but now I see that there are girls here, but there are way more girls in college. Back then, I just wasn't that focused on the right things. But I realize that it's not too late and I am focused on my education. My mind is on my schoolwork so that I can graduate and go on to college and I am proud of myself".

Only two of the 16 students shared the belief that their scholastic work had been consistently excellent throughout their tenure in high school, and it is no coincidence that these students held the number one and two spot as males in the school with the highest grade point averages. Randy expressed his feelings towards his academic success with a sense of surrealism:

"My academic success means so much to me. Like every day that I wake up, I thank God and I tell myself that I am proud of myself. I can think back to third grade and I used to really struggle with school. In fact, I was held back and I was in special education for a while. So I get bugged out when I think about my success. It's like I am not suppose to be where I am at. Out of all the boys in my class, I am the top graduating male senior. And out of the whole class, I rank at

number eight. That's crazy. And if some of ya'll knew what I been through when I was younger you wouldn't believe how far I have come. You wouldn't even believe that I am graduating. So just me knowing my history, man, that makes me feel real good".

Other characteristics that the students in this study shared were a sense of optimism and purpose, high expectations for themselves, maturity, individualism, and the courage to be different. Robert poignantly explains the importance of these traits:

"What is boils down to is your definition of success... You could see a successful black man, you know, own a business and work at wall street, working for the NFL, NBA, whatever, but then you might see a man on the street selling drugs doing his thing you know, with mad fly cars, baggy clothes, and you might say to yourself, that man is making it, he is successful. I think that many young people's definition of success has to be tweaked a little bit, and tweaking comes with maturity (everyone nods in agreement). Maturity comes in when you realize what you want to be. (Someone chimes in, 'and when you realize what you don't want to be'). Yeah, it can work both ways and it has a lot to do with the people you surround yourself with and the people that are in your corner. Like in school, you have your teachers, your counselors, your coaches, everyone telling you that this is what you gotta do to graduate in four years. So okay, then it's like after four years, what do you wanna do? Okay, so I wanna be a lawyer. If you want, you'll have college professors in your ear telling you what you gotta do to be a lawyer, or a teacher, or another type of profession. So I think with maturity you start to realize that you can't do certain things and still be a lawyer or a teacher. You can't be on the block selling drugs and getting into all types of trouble and then think that just because I decide to be a teacher that it's gonna happen. You gotta have goals and you gotta be willing to put in the hard work to achieve those goals and sometimes that means separating from the crowd-from the block".

Students in this study were also able "to make sense of a global picture, which suggested to them that education was the key to being heard and visible in today's society" (Graham & Anderson, 2008, p. 487). Ernest's words revealed a strong belief that his academic efforts will pay off in the future:

"You really got to watch who you hang around. If you hang around people that don't care about their education, then you just not gonna care. You know what I am saying. To me, nowadays, you not gonna want to drop out of high school. If I did that, first off, everyone would look at me like, 'you stupid, you just dropped out of high school, that was the dumbest thing that you could do.' Probably back



then when those statistics about Blacks dropping out were real high, dropping out was the thing to do. Probably cats was like, 'who cares about high school. I rather drop out and just get money.' But real talk, right now it's not even worth it. I was watching that movie "Get Rich or Die Trying" and in the beginning of that movie Fifty Cents was talking about how selling drugs is less than working for minimum wage. Like if you add up all the hours of being on the block, and then if you go to jail and think about how much time you gonna spend in jail just for that little quick money, then it's not worth it cause that bread is gonna come and it's gonna go. But when you get a job because you have a good education, that's great cause can't nobody take that away from you. Nobody can say, 'give me back that degree.' You can't take my degree and you can't take what I know. The skills you develop in school are yours now and later. For example, if I know how to fix electricity, then I know that I can provide a legitimate service that people will always need. But if it's like drugs, people can take drugs away from you. I've seen it done man! Anybody can touch your house, your car, anything that you can get from hustling".

Lastly, the students in both focus groups also displayed a deep sense of respect and admiration for each other and at times during the groups were complimentary about each other's academic achievement. George commended Gieno on his bright future while reflecting on his own past:

"When I got to high school I ain't really know which way to go and so I made bad choices and when I had to deal with the consequences, like when I got kicked off the football team, I saw that as a rejection and so I ain't work the way that I should have to get back into some of the positive things that I was involved in. I liked school in junior high and I wished that I remained as focused as Gieno did throughout high school and I ain't fall for the peer pressure. Cause I look at my life now and I really got to struggle very hard to graduate, I got to struggle to get out of things because of everything that has happened. I also have to struggle to do the best thing that I can because I have a son now. I got to struggle to get a job too cause I got a mouth to feed. And when I look at Gieno over there, he did his thing about to graduate, he play basketball, he probably get a scholarship to go to college, and it's not like I am saying that I want to take anything back cause for me, I wouldn't cause I learned a lot from what I been through, but I must say that it would be good to be in that man's shoes. It's like, I got a good future ahead of me too, but now I got my son, I gotta be a lot more careful. Like, I can't afford to get in trouble. (To Gieno:) That's what's up. You did your thing and now it's bout to pay off big time".

### *The Role of Family*

The majority of participants (88%; n=14) reported that family played an integral role in their ability to withstand unattractive situations and push forward academically and in other areas of their lives. Winfield (1994) asserted that parents of resilient children give their adolescents structure in their everyday tasks, actively participate in their educational pursuits, and show interests in their children's ambitions. Romeo emphasized this notion when he shared:

“I think that lack of focus is one of the main reasons kids that are on the streets are on the streets. If they had parents that didn't place no value in school and they dropped out, then their parents are probably not asking them if they did their homework or anything like that. I think it all goes back to the pressure that people put on you. And to me, pressure not always a bad thing. Like I said before, my father not behind me checking my every move, but he has certain expectations for me because he did it himself. You got kids walking outta class saying, ‘ if I get in trouble in school, I ain't gonna get in trouble at home’ or saying, ‘ if I get suspended I don't care because there are no consequences for me at home.’ So they start to think that acting up in school is cool or common because there is no reinforcement at home. There is nothing that is going to happen to them if they don't do well in school. So for me, I am motivated because I know that it wasn't easy for my pops. He did it coming from Jamaica, so why I can't do it”.

Many of the youth reported that when they experienced a problem at school, they could return to their family for emotional support. For example, students were asked the question, “What about the haters- other students, teachers, or people in your community that tried to put you down-what experiences do you have with these people and what is your general way of handling people like that? Of the 10 participants that responded, 70% (n=7) cited family support as helpful in dealing with troublesome folks. For Gieno, it was his mother's active participation in his educational pursuits that helped him to stay ambitious about his academic achievement:

“...and yeah, there was peer pressure, even in elementary school to not take school so seriously and just have fun, and I did act out at times, but my mother was always there. She was always there to correct me. She was always the one to come to school and make sure that I was on point and I didn’t like that. I eventually figured it out, though. I realized that I wasn’t gonna act out because my mother would get on my case. But no, I didn’t like her being so involved and always worrying what I was doing when I was in elementary and junior high school and even in high school, but as I matured and seen some of the other kids that I knew from elementary and junior high school either not finish or struggle real bad cause of the things that they did or because they ain’t have nobody there for them, I realized that I was lucky and I am glad my moms got in the way she did cause I needed that”.

Gieno’s realization that his mother’s involvement in his education was crucial to his academic success is in harmony with Trusty’s research (1998) where it was found that parental involvement and parental attempts to integrate into their child’s schooling was predictive of student academic achievement.

In addition to parental support, 50% (n=16) of the youth shared that the support and exemplary work of older siblings positively affected their school persistence. Jabari informed the group that his mother was on drugs when he was growing up and it was his older brother who stepped up and raised him. Jabari continues to admire his older brother today:

“ I mean, my brother...I owe him so much...cause like he raised me with practically nothing. My mother did get off drugs and get better and she is in my life now. I live with my father now and sometimes my mother comes over. But I just would watch my brother growing up. He started off in a barbershop cutting hair and now he part owner of the shop. That man went to work every day, faithfully. So how I am not gone do my thing when I got him as an example”.

Corey shared about how his older sister’s influence has been tremendous in helping him deal with ridicule at school:

“It’s no secret that I had brain surgery this year. I was gone from school for mad long. But when I came back, a lot of kids were making fun of me cause I had the spot on my head from the surgery; they had all types of jokes. I got brain surgery,

but I was still smart. Sometimes I would be a little off and they misunderstood what was going on and made fun of me. But see my sister helps me out a lot with that cause she always tells me that I am still smart. I had to relearn so much and I'm still doing better than a lot of kids. People don't understand how I am still smart, but my sister do. She be like, 'wow, how do you still know all of this. You are really smart.' And that means a lot coming from her because I feel stupid compared to her. She is really the smart one in the family”.

When asked to respond to the question, “What have your relationships been like with older African-American males in your family and in your community?”, Andre juxtaposed his perception of his father with his perception of his twin brother:

“Well growing up I would say that I had the best of both worlds. My father was a basketball player I mean, he was so good that he could have went to the NBA, but he didn't do it. Then my twin brother, on top of that, he was the one with good grades, full ride to Wesleyan U. It was the best of both worlds because I had a positive side and a negative side to look at. Like my brother is the positive for me. My father, he did good growing up, but then he got into drugs. He sold drugs and did drugs. I mean, I can't really say that he amounted to nothing because he has nothing to show for his early success. So when I say that I had the best of both worlds, I mean that I had two different examples that made me realize that I want to be somebody, not just anybody. I want to be a part of life”.

Another significant finding about family relationships was that encouraging and supportive relationships with family members (and namely parents) fostered a greater sense of autonomy in these youth. When responding to the question of “What does your academic achievement mean to you, your family, and your closest friends?”, Romeo shared that clear expectations about achievement coupled with effective modeling motivated him to do better in school:

“It's all about decisions. I can't pinpoint the moment, but a while back I started thinking that whatever I do, I'm going to be doing it for me. So my father told me that I am not living life for him, I am living life for me. So I started thinking that I like the person that I am, but I could do better. I mean, I'm in school and I got a job in all that, but I can be better and so I started doing better and focusing more on my schoolwork. And so now that I am in my senior year, I feel good cause I talked myself into doing it because I know that I had it in me. As far as my family is concerned, my academic success was expected. My sister graduated

from UCONN and my father has a Master's degree. It's like everybody in my family went to college so I can't even sit here and front like I am going to be the first person in my family to go to college. Over 15 people in my family went to college, so college- that's the expectation-and if you don't do it, it's like, 'what's going on, what happened to you. You know you had our support'".

Two of the students shared that creating family by becoming fathers inspired them to do better in high school and in life. Andre talked about how having his daughter has changed his perspective on many things:

"It was like, being a child, I really didn't feel too much peer pressure because I had a twin brother and we were always with each other. But then in junior high school when I got held back and he went on to the next grade things became difficult because I was living in the shadow of him. That was hard because he was always an honor student all throughout his years of school. I was smart, but my grades didn't match his so I used to be bad. When I got [to Buchanan], I looked for the bad guys to hang out with cause I wanted to separate myself from my brother. Like me and George, we were in a lot of the same classes and we used to walk outta class and get in trouble and stuff. So I didn't really worry about my grades. They were good, good enough to be passing the classes, but to me they were nothing compared to my brothers and so I didn't try to do my best during my freshman year especially because it was the peer pressure of being behind my brother. I hated living in his shadow. But now that I am a senior, he already graduated. He got a full ride to college. I still kind of feel like I am living in his shadows, but not too, too much because my personal life has really changed. I have a daughter. So my perspective on life has really changed. So living in my brother's shadows and trying to be the opposite of what he represents is not me no more. When I do good, I do it for me and my daughter. Also, now I don't hate the idea of being smart like my brother...that's no longer a bad thing".

A quarter of the students (n= 4) indicated that poor modeling on the part of a parent was a huge factor in these students' decision to devalue school and academic achievement early on in high school. Raymond shared:

"I fell off in high school not cause of peer pressure or because kids was making fun of me for being smart, but because I was a drug dealer. I started selling weed in school. I was concerned about getting my money; the books was secondary. But then, real talk, I realized that I was just acting like my father. He was this big-time drug dealer and then he got killed. So I eventually had to wise up and get up off that cause I was constantly getting in trouble in school and with the law and I knew I was gone either end up like [my father] or in jail".

Andre talked about the impact his father's early success and subsequent failure had his academic achievement:

“Yeah, I could relate a lot to what you are saying because my dad went [to Buchanan high] and he played basketball. So before I use to see it as like, “dag, I could do whatever” cause I used to do mad stuff and never get in trouble for it. All I used to hear from everybody was like, ‘Oh, your dad went here. He was such a great basketball player and everything.’ So it was like people was stuck on that and worrying about my dad that they let me get away with mad stuff. But then it was like I realized that that wasn't good cause I wasn't getting nowhere and I wasn't learning nothing. Like my dad was a great player in all, but he ain't really go nowhere. People had expectation for him in stuff like going into the NBA, but then he started hustling and using [drugs] and it's like, he don't have much to show for it now”.

### *The School Context*

#### *Freshman Year*

“Freshman year” or first year of high school was a topic that all of the study's participants (n=16) commented on at some point during the focus groups. Eighty-eight percent (n=14) of the participants stated that they felt concern about entering high school. Although they listed different reasons for this apprehension, most students generally believed that they would be treated badly in high school because of their freshman status. Sixty-nine percent (n=11) related this idea to sports and expressed apprehension about starting at the bottom and the arduous task of having to prove one's self-worth athletically. Gerald's comment exemplified this point:

“Yeah, it's like when we were in junior high school, we might have played sports and done really well with our grades and been at the top of class in a lot of ways. Coming into high school as a freshman again just reminded us that we weren't as hot as we were in junior high and it was time to prove ourselves again”.

Other reservations about coming into high school included fear of violence because students had heard that Buchanan high was a “bad school”, and worry about the

ability to perform academically at the same level as students had done in junior high school. Romeo shared:

“When I came outta Junior High School I thought that we was gonna have like a freshman Friday –you know when all the older kids rag on the freshman. Especially at Buchanan. I ain’t really know much about this school, but I did hear that it was bad and I thought I was gone like be getting jumped everything”.

George shared:

“...we’ll when I was coming to high school from junior high school I really cannot say that I had any fears about violence. I didn’t really think about that Freshman Friday stuff. I was actually excited to come to high school cause during junior high I just had so much going on outside of school with my family and stuff. But then again, I knew that the work would be harder in high school so I wondered how I would keep my grades up. High school was higher stakes so I definitely worried about doing my thing so that I could make the most out of the four years because they would get me into college”.

Student apprehensions about the transitions from junior high to ninth grade are consistent with existing literature that indicates that for freshman, the transition to high school can be anxiety-producing (Miller-Cribs et al., 2002).

The actual course of the ninth-grade year was a period of academic and developmental hardships for many of the study’s participants. All (n=16) agreed that freshman-year was marked with much violent behavior on the part of students. The words “fights”, “riots”, “gangs”, and “wannabees” were salient in participants’ reflections. Jonathan stated that during freshman-year, “we had like three riots. There was an incident that year with a police officer that got hurt tryna intervene in a fight. He got his head busted open.” George piped in with more passion when another participant in his focus group incorrectly paraphrased his words and suggested that George said that he was “not doing what you were suppose to be doing in class [freshman-year] and expected people to run after you and help you”:

“No, I didn’t say that. What I said is that my mindset was different my freshman-year. It’s not that I really didn’t care about succeeding in high school cause I always cared. The problem was with who I hung around. Freshman-year, it was like everybody in school was tryna fight. There was all of these wanna be gangs poppin up. Freshman-year was wild. Like everybody wanted to be a tough guy. You [referring to the researcher] had to be here to really understand what we went through our freshman-year. There were so many fights freshman-year. Like that’s why I said before, Buchanan has calmed down a lot. Most people are more focused on their grades now. My freshman-year there was so many people suspended and expelled. Freshman-year I just had a lot of things that I had my mind on. I mean, I remember walking outta class because I was mad at an argument that was going on. There were more times like that, where I would just get up and walk out of class. Freshman-year was such a crazy year. I am not gonna say that I didn’t want to do the work, but there were so many other things, like brick walls that kept me doing what I should have been doing. There were teachers that tried to help me but it took me some time to actually see the help that they were trying to devote to me. Eventually I did take it, and so my experience does not mean that I just simply didn’t want to do anything”.

George’s grades did suffer during his freshman-year; regrettable, for him the transition to high school brought about negative consequences such as low grades and poor school attendance for a time. With an air of remorse, he shared how freshman-year is a ruthless time for many youth:

“What happens is that freshman is mainly what messes alot of people up. A lot of people have regrets and be like, ‘I should have buckled down and did my thing.’ I think that the school needs to express how important that first year is, cause it’s really the foundation. We thinking we in high school now and we just want to wild out and have fun. You don’t know how hard it is to come back up after you done messed up freshman-year”.

Fortunately for George and virtually all of the study’s participants, pro-social behavior and school engagement was increased through involvement in sports and other extra-curricular activities.

### *The Role of Extracurricular Activities, Namely Sports*

Perhaps the most prominent topic of discussion that emerged from both focus groups was on the overall positive social relationship between student involvement in



extracurricular activities and their task engagement in classroom instruction. As noted earlier, at the time of this study, all of the participants were a part of the Young Men's Leadership Program (YMLP), a mentorship program that matches collegiate and professional men with adolescent male students at Buchanan high. The YMLP meets twice a week for 2 hours after school at Buchanan high and students voluntarily participate. The average participation duration for students in the YMLP is 2 years. All (100%; n=16) of the students identified the YMLP as having a positive impact on their academic achievement. Although students joined the group at different grade intervals, all saw academic success as one of the core values of the YMLP. Anthony shared:

“The YMLP is preparing us to go to college and enter the work force. That's why we dress up. At first, I ain't gone front, I thought it was kinda corny, but then again, the girls seemed to like it. But, no, seriously, seeing [the YMLP co-facilitators] volunteer here two time a week looking fresh to death, I realized that not dressing up was taking the easy way out. Proper business attire is a must for us as we graduate high school and take the next step into the real world. [The co-facilitator's] are giving us a head's up by having us do that now. Plus, they [the group's co-facilitator's] got connects, and so if you don't have business attire, they work with local businesses to get it for you because most of us did not have it or only had one pair of slacks, or whatever”.

The YMLP program was co-facilitated by two African-American men who were both in their twenties, college graduates from a local university, gainfully employed and residing in the Norwood community, and a part of a major historically Black fraternity. Both men were born and raised in poverty-stricken urban environments and were transparent with students about poignant parts of their narratives and the need to cultivate young Black men to value community, self, and education. Both men also ran the YMLP at no cost to Buchanan high, and in addition to meeting with students twice a week at school, they had students participate in various community service and social awareness

projects (i.e. college tours, AIDS walks) and fun social events (i.e. step-shows). Students saw themselves as fortunate for partaking in the YMLP; for them, the group was a safe place where they could come and connect with other young black men, let their guards down, and unload. More than half of the students (63%; n= 10) indicated that they saw the program facilitators as role models particularly because they volunteered their time, showed tremendous concern for student academic progress, and were so intimately connected to the Norwood Community. For example, when commenting on how tough freshman-year was, Andre shared:

“Like me, I can vouch for what George is saying because we had almost all of the same classes. We hung out a lot, we even got into arguments, but you know we was always cool. But like there was always opportunity and I think that I first realized that when that dude [YMLP co-facilitator) came to me freshman- year. He came to one of our classes and spoke to me. He basically said like, ‘I was doing the same thing; my grades weren’t having a positive impact, but people helped me wise up and look at me now- college grad, working, in a fraternity, don’t be a statistic. I know that you can do better.’ That hit me and although I didn’t come to YML immediately, I did come”.

Many of the study’s participants were baffled that more students did not take advantage of the YMLP. In answering the question, “What do you think accounts for the drastic differences in academic achievement between black male students and everybody else?”, Gieno asserted:

“You do have programs designed to keep kids in school, but people don’t take advantage of it. Prime example, Young Men’s Leadership (YML)...all of us, we go around in the halls like, ‘yo, come to YML, we talk about real stuff in here.’ But they be like, ‘that’s corny blah, blah, blah, I rather go chase girls.’ But the bugged out thing about is that most of the girl is in here (the room where the group meets) talking to the guys that go to YML. Cause you gotta think about it like this: you in college and even in high school, I am quite sure that no girl really wants to be with a dude that is just walking around the hallways with his pants hanging off his behind. She wants a dude that is focused. Really, what is a dude that is walking around the hallways gonna do for her”?

Justin added:

“Yeah, I definitely think that you have to have support to succeed, but you also got to have the mentality to take it. The support could be there, but it’s about whether you use it or not... Young Men’s Leadership... we have kids in the school that are going through stuff and know about Young Men’s Leadership and they don’t use it. It doesn’t make sense to me. It’s here. They just have to take it in their hands and grab it”.

In addition to their participation in the Young Men’s Leadership Program (YMLP), all of the students (n= 16) were involved in at least one other extracurricular school-related activity such as sports, peer-tutoring, an employment internship, and various social and academic clubs. Most students reported that no other extra-curricular activity had more of an impact on them than playing sports did. As noted earlier, student apprehension around how well they would fair with sports in high school was significant (69%; n=11). Yet students looked forward to playing sports because it had been part of their identity in junior high school or because they wanted it to become part of their identity. For example, Andre chose sports as a way to differentiate himself from his twin brother in high school. In answering the question about “fears about coming to high school,” he shared:

“Well I came to high school and my twin brother was already here and so I knew that I was gone be good, but he always got better grades than me, so I guess I kinda thought he had me in that area and then I was gonna carve out my own path with sports. So I was definitely looking to play varsity sports”.

All of the students described their bout with sports during their first year in high school as an “initiation process” where they were given a “rough” time by upperclassman and coaches alike until they “proved” themselves. Participant words suggested that they had a good understanding of this “tough love” and were not regretful of the process.

Romeo commented:

“Yeah, like when you a freshman and you on varsity, it’s like they don’t really expect much from you. Even the coaches and stuff might say things like, ‘You dumb freshman.’ They don’t expect us to really come to the table with nothing. We just had to prove ourselves”.

Gieno contextualized Romeo’s comment:

“I mean, its not a bad thing. It’s just part of the process, something that we had to go through and now that I am a senior and I look back at how others players were with me and I am actually grateful because it did make me a better person and I am real persistent now. Plus, now that I am a senior, I get to rag on the freshman and I tell them that they gotta pay their dues”.

Robert shared about the tools students gained from the “initiation process”:

“As far as they whole initiation thing is concerned, I just wanted to point out that that process is simply a way of making sure that we all humbled ourselves. I was involved in sports my freshman-year and the point of the initiation was really to make sure that you knew that even though you were ‘freshman varsity’ you were not too good for the team. It taught us that the team was always above the individual”.

Being part of school sports teams during freshman-year taught these youth about teamwork and about the importance of self-confidence, a positive self-identity, humility, and persistence. For many of the students, sports helped to offset some of the negative consequences that the transition to high school can bring such as decreased academic performance, lower self-esteem, less involvement in activities, and greater feelings of anonymity. Ernest commented on the connection between sports and positive schoolwork engagement. When asked: “what are some things about who you are as individual that you think have helped you to do well in high school?”, he reported:

“I think one of the things that you have to keep in mind when it comes to learning is that you have to have something that keeps you focused. It’s like you gotta have a goal for what all of this is about. Like for me, I didn’t always see the education piece, the going to class and studying the work as the best part of school, but I loved sports. So I put my energy into something that I knew that I would get excited about. To stay on the football team, you gotta maintain a certain GPA. You can’t have Fs or Ds or nothing like that. So I always wanted to make sure that

I didn't have any Fs and Ds on my report card cause then I would be pulled out of sports. Like I'm the best student during football season. I don't get in trouble in school, my homework is always done and in on time, everything is straight. But then as soon as football season is over, it's usually every year with me, except this year, I get into some type of trouble. I'm suspended or I am missing a whole bunch of assignments, or ...I don't know , I guess with football I have structure. It's what makes me want to go to class and get my work done. And don't get me wrong. I know that that stuff is important. I gotta hear it from my moms all the time and I want to do the work, but it's just like without football it gets hard to focus. When it comes to football, you gotta go to practice, we have study hall and by the time we get home we tired. All I want to do is go home, finish the rest of that homework and then go to sleep. It certain stipulations to be on the team”.

Ernest's words underscore Bonner and Jennings' study (2007), in which they found that it was critical to avoid a purely academic approach to leadership, one in which students only learn lessons in leadership processes through temporal exercise. Indeed, a multidisciplinary approach was needed to keep these students engaged in school. George made this assertion when discussing what he thought accounted for the achievement gap:

“Man, yeah, I gotta say, it's support (a number of the students are in agreement with this statement). They don't have that support. Yeah, it's crazy because as I look around the room, I see that most of the people in here play sports. For most of us, sports is what kept us in school. If it wasn't for sports, I don't know where any of us would be. Like I ain't gonna lie, freshman-year, me and Andre, we was rough, but football is what kept us in line. It was the discipline for real and the fact that I was a part of something. Like even though I got kicked off the football team, I still tried to do something, like acting, joining the drama club, anything to keep me interested so that I could stay in school cause just the classes would not have been enough”.

One student did report that his commitment to school sports was not always positively correlated his academic achievement or development. Robert shared:

“Well I think that I had a different experience than some of the others. In 8<sup>th</sup> grade, I played basketball in high school really well and I was actually chosen to come to this high school because of my athletic abilities. So when I got here I worked really hard at my school work and then I would go push myself really hard cause everyone just knew that I was gonna be this big sports guy. I definitely have to say that I pushed myself way too hard. I was lifting weights that were too heavy for my size. I was staying late working out when I really

should have been home either doing homework or just enjoying being fourteen, fifteen, you know. But I felt like I had the weight of everybody riding on my shoulders and I couldn't disappoint. I tried to please everybody and I put what everybody wanted me to do way above my own needs. But now that I am about to graduate and I got a football scholarship to Georgetown. But the pressure to do well really got to me. I mean, at one point I found out that mad people that said that they were going to be there for me really were was not there for me. People in my church, my coaches, some friends...and so I realized that at the end of the day my job is to take care of me. So I'm going to Georgetown on a football scholarship, not basketball, cause that's my decision. That's the sport that I want to pursue despite what other sports people think that I should play".

Still, overall, student responses to their participation in extra-curricular activities showed that the programs that they participated in positively affected these individuals and were influential in the development of these students' ability to stay committed to school and to excel academically. These programs helped the African American males in this study develop positive self-esteem, achieve at high levels, and more importantly, "learn the values of working and understanding group dynamics that will help them to matriculate successfully into society" (Fashola, 2005, p. 6).

#### *Students' Relationships to Teachers/Other Buchanan High School Staff Members*

Virtually all of the students (88%; n=14) agreed on two tenets about teachers at Buchanan. First, there were teachers that students described as "just here for a paycheck"; these teachers were juxtapose with teachers who "really cared" and who were willing to employ flexible teaching methods to help students succeed. Fortunately, all of the study participants (n=16) believed that more teachers at Buchanan truly cared about students than not.

A minority of students (25%; n=4) expanded on what it was like to be in classrooms with teachers who held low expectations for students. Interesting enough, all of these students had these experiences while in the educational tracking courses that are

known for locking African-American males into substandard classes and ineffective classroom learning environments. When responding to the question on the achievement gap, Andre commented:

“Just cause you don’t work doesn’t mean that you don’t know the work or that you don’t even want to do the work. I was in basic classes before and yeah, I did the work and it was easy, but I was never really there because I never liked being there. Honestly, I use to be like, ‘this work is so easy, why am I even here?’ So that’s why I had the chance to act out and do whatever cause I felt like I already knew the work. Like what the teachers were talking about I knew already so I had the chance to act out cause I was on top of everything. The work was mad easy so when I had assignments I would do then, but then the rest of the time was mine. I acted out cause I wasn’t getting nothing out of it. I should have never even been in classes like that. So sometimes it’s not about it just being two different halves of Buchanan and you separating yourself from the good half or the smart half. Sometimes it’s not about people not wanting to learn. People want to learn, people do care, but then being put in a class like that, there is nothing pushing you to learn, and so sometimes people give up because of that”.

When the researcher inquired as to whether Andre ever stepped up and informed his teachers that he did not belong in particular classes because he could handle challenging work, he shared:

“I mean, I did say something, but it’s like no one really takes what you say to heart if they see you acting out. And then you got some teachers that will just tell you off the bat, ‘I’m only here for a paycheck. Whether you are here or not, I don’t care cause I am getting my check.’ A lot of times you can say, ‘man I don’t want to be here because the work is too easy,’ but it’s like you are talking a brick wall. It’s like, for some teachers, you get in trouble, you a bad student, you not smart. When a lot of times you wildin out cause the work is garbage”.

Students defined “caring teachers” as those individuals that demonstrated consistency, forged a relationship with students, set clear boundaries and expectations, held students accountable, and who employed creative teaching methods. Salient descriptive words students echoed about some of their favorite teachers were that they were “funny”, “charismatic”, “real”, “honest”, “devoted”, and “loved”. Students

attributed “the relationship” between student and teacher as the main ingredient to promoting student resiliency and fostering academic success. When responding to the question, “What have staff members at school (teachers, administrators, counselors, etc.) done that has made the biggest positive impact on your achievement?”, Ernest responded:

“A lot of the teachers are genuine in this school. It’s all about the relationship. Once you establish a relationship with them, they are gonna try their best and support you in whatever it is that you want to do. They got things they gotta get done, but they really want to see you get something outta it”.

George piped in:

“My drama teacher- she is also a history teacher, but she is my drama teacher. Every since I came to this school and I was real active, she has been guiding me. Even when I got in trouble and got locked up. She wrote me letters, encouraging letters to keep my head up. She basically helped me to really grow into who I am today. Without her I probably would be doing...I don’t know...I would be doing a lot worst. There are a couple of other teachers that helped me out a lot too... I guess the biggest thing about all of those teachers is the fact that they look out for me. Like I would say that I am not a hard person to get along with. Even if I sense that a teacher doesn’t like me, which I have in this school, I am still not gon try to give you a reason to not like me, but most of my teachers try to make sure that I have a good relationship with them and they really do try to look out for me. Like my English teacher...when I came back to school [from being incarcerated], I was not even gonna past her class cause I wasn’t doing the work, but she begged me like, ‘George, come in, let’s get this work done, I believe you can pass the class.’ I remember when I was missing class and going to court or whatever and I missed the final. She let me sit for a make-up exam. She was like, ‘here, open book, get it down.’ Boom, 84, I passed the class. That’s why I feel like there is no excuse. Most of these teachers do care”.

George’s words are in line with findings that suggests that the underachievement pattern can be reversed through modification of the instructional program to increase the student’s motivation to participate in school and achieve at higher levels of performance Hebert (1998).



Students were cognizant of the fact that there was a cultural mismatch between the ethnicity of the student population and the teaching staff. While the student population at Buchanan high is 88% African-American, students could only identify a handful of African-American teachers. Romeo shared:

“This school is mostly Black students...it’s damn near all Blacks. We have some Puerto Ricans, but it’s like three White kids in this school. That’s crazy cause we have like mostly white teachers. The difference is crazy, right. We should have more Black teachers here”.

Yet, students believed that a teacher’s skin color did not have to undermine his/her ability to be effective. Jabari asserted:

“I ain’t gonna front, Black teachers push you pretty hard, but good teachers are good teachers regardless of their race. There are teachers who are just here for the paychecks, but many who really care and we know who those teachers are”.

Milner and Howard (2004) wrote that “high expectations, deep caring for Black children, [and] belief in their capacity to succeed” can contribute to a cultural connection in the teaching and learning environment (p. 294). Romeo highlighted this assertion when reflecting on a critical time of connection between him and his White history teacher:

“There are a few teachers here that have really affected me. Like he said, there are definitely teachers that care here. Like my history teacher. I remember one day like sophomore year, he pulled me to the side and said, ‘I was just like you when I was in high school. I use to be bad just like you, showing out in stuff.’ I remember looking at him, thinking, ‘Mr. (teacher’s name omitted), you White, and you a cornball or whatever. You ain’t never been in no trouble.’ So it’s like crazy to sit back and think what his life must have been like then to what it is now with him being a teacher and he also told me that he got his own business or whatever. And he ain’t have to share that with me. So that was definitely a deep moment. It was times like that really motivated me to think and want to do better with myself”.

Ernest agreed with Romeo and pointed to his teacher’s authenticity as a favorable factor:

“I definitely agree with that cause my math teacher, like he is the funniest teacher, but he teaches you so much and he is so devoted to it. Like Saturdays, he doesn't even get paid but he opens up the school and has Saturday tutoring where he helps you get extra credit and works with you on certain stuff so that you can really understand what he is teaching you. So then you can't even say that he don't want to help. He wants to help you do your best so that you can get those scholarships cause a lot of them are first come, first serve. Like, he'll take you on trips to like Philadelphia, and every hour that passes and we study, that's an hour towards your Gear-up (academic work needed to successfully pass the class)”.

Students saw their relationships with teachers as a partnership, a collaboration, and indicated that teachers displayed tremendous care for students when they could appropriately commensurate student behavior and effort. Gieno shared:

“Teachers in this school give you what you give them. If they see you a bright kid, hardworking, quiet, and you fall behind, most teachers will extend their hand to help you. Like teachers have said to me that, ‘I see you having a problem with this. Come after school and I am gonna break it down to you. I'll give you one on one time.’ But if you sitting in class all lackadaisical like, ‘I don't want to do this. Let me go walk the halls cause I know that there are some girls walking the halls’ then the teachers are not really gonna put that effort out there to help you. Then you got people complaining like, ‘how I get this? Why am I getting an F in this class?’ Then they want to put it all on the teachers but they have to look at what they did. If you ain't do no work, you can't expect to skate through. That's just not realistic. It might be cool now, but it don't work like that in college”.

Robert added:

“I think that the one thing that the students have in common with the teachers that look out for us is the love factor. They might see you just trying, trying to make it. Some kids don't even try. Like I said the thing about there being two Buchanan highs. Some kids just walk the halls and they don't even go to class to try to do the work. So when the teachers see us trying to make something of ourselves, whether it includes sports, or just a focus on the books, when teachers see us trying to make a will for ourselves, they are there actually pushing us along cause they want to see us do well”.

In addition to teachers, most of the youth in this study indicated that the guidance of other supportive staff at Buchanan high has been essential to their academic success.

More than half of the students (56%; n=9) identified particular school staff, included that

of coaches, counselors, and even one of the school security guards, that acted as important figures in terms of modeling positive educational attitudes and behaviors.

Justin shared about the support he saw in counselors:

“I think that another thing that hasn’t been addressed is the counselors. If you really want to get your education and you don’t like what the teachers are saying then you can go and talk to counselors. You don’t have to listen to what the teachers are saying. The counselors are busy, but if you make an appointment with them, they’ll talk to you about school, about stuff outside of school, whatever. They try to encourage you to stay positive about school by asking you what you wanna get outta it. Then, when you tell them, the next time they see you, they ask you about it. And they do remember, cause they’ll use your name and ask about specific things”.

A number of the students talked about the relationships that they had with coaches past and present. Coaches were viewed as father figures who “nurtured a family like environment” (Herbert and Reis, 1999, p. 446) for students. Coaches were also known as important and respective figures who were indigenous to the Norwood community. Ernest shared:

“Then there is the basketball coach...like he is not my coach for anything cause I don’t play basketball, only football. But I always go and talk to him every once in a while. Like I went over to our rival high school and the kids over there were talking about how he is such a good coach. Every year, he will take some of their basketball players to camp with some of his basketball players and that’s mad real. He helps those kids get scholarships and get all types of connections. And for me, I rock with him because he is somebody who is genuine to what he is doing. He is real about what he is doing. It’s not all about the money because he don’t get paid to send [the other school’s] kids to camp with this school’s kids. He don’t get paid to get them connections and he don’t get paid to help them secure scholarships. That’s one of the things that I look for in a teacher...someone who is real and genuine to their profession. Cause us as teenagers, we can smell out who is real and who is fake. Like they say, ‘separate the real from the phonies.’ Teenagers just have that eye and we can do that without you even knowing that we are doing that. We evaluate teachers just like they evaluate us”.

When asked, “What have your relationships been like with older African-American males in your family and in your community?”, Gerald talked about the positive impact his former coach turned current school security guard had on him:

“In terms of African American males that I look up to, I do have some. For example, my freshman-year I looked up to a coach. He is a security guard at our school right now. I know that it’s kinda bugged that I look up to him, but I do. When I saw him at school, I was like ‘wow’ because I hadn’t seen him in a minute but I actually do look up to him because he went to college, he went to this high school, he played semi-pro football. I really do look up to him. I would be like him but I want to blaze my own path. It’s cool to be inspired by someone else, but instead of simply following in someone else’s footsteps, I want to start my own path. He did inspire me and he is one of the reason’s I’ll go and be in a recreation class rather than go and hang out with those fools that would rather be violent”.

#### *School Resources*

Unlike a great deal of literature that suggests that urban public schools are largely under-resourced, student responses overwhelmingly revealed their belief that Buchanan high had plenty of resources for students. Students were asked the following question, “You all attend a school that is mostly comprised of African-American students; how do you think that fact affects the type of resources and opportunities at your school.” Eighty-eight percent of students (n=16) responded to this question and essentially shared that the school had many resources for students in and outside of the classroom. All participants had taken at least two (and no more than five) advanced placement classes and were satisfied with the college preparation their school had provided to them. In addition, students commented that classroom instruction was complimented with opportunities for real-world experiences and authentic training opportunities. Robert shared:

“Buchanan has a lot of resources. People just don’t use them enough or not at all what so ever. If you heard that this school is bad, it is not because they don’t have programs designed to help students. Especially now. This school has come a long way. I mean, we’ve had the Young Men’s Leadership for a few years now. Like, let’s say that you play basketball, the coach knows everybody downtown. Everybody knows somebody downtown and somebody can help you out. Last year’s senior class had two million dollars worth of scholarship money. It makes no sense. There are so many resources here. The opportunity really is here but you got students that chose not to go look and grab it. For example, that’s like saying that my man over here chose to just walk the streets when he know he can get involved with a sport at school. He got a good size; he could probably play football in several positions. Let’s say running back. He plays running back on the team; he’ll scout with the team, get his grades right, there’s a scholarship for him. There is a scholarship here for everybody. You just got to be willing to put in the work and take advantage of the opportunity”.

Justin expanded on Robert’s words, highlighting the wealth of academic opportunities available in addition to sports-related venues for students to develop and display their leadership abilities in meaningful ways:

“Don’t get me wrong. When I was in middle school, I heard that this school was a bad school, and it was. That’s what I heard. So when I came here, that’s why I went straight into sports. Yeah, we do have teachers that honestly just want to get their paycheck. But then we got teachers that really want to interact with us and push us to the next level and help us out. Like there are engineering internships available. I have teachers that have recommended me for those types of internships that pay \$10-\$12.00 dollars an hour. I want a career in engineering so they are helping me to get those types of experiences now. But yeah, some kids during their freshman-year don’t take advantage of what they got. We have a whole room over there that’s like a career center. Like you can go in there and get an internship. You can go in there and get a job with Comcast. But I bet you any money that the Comcast room is empty right now. Yeah, like they have [college] students from [a local university] that come here faithfully to volunteer their time and help you with your homework. They help you to get your grades up”.

The experiences of these two students show that they were able to positively connect with school in part because they believed that taking advantage of the school’s abundant resources would provide pay-offs for them in the near future.

A few of students (n=2) did share that they were cognizant of the fact that Buchanan high was not as well-resourced as some of the other Norwood public high schools, namely the magnet schools that had a significantly lower student population, and which drew in a larger population of white students. For example, Gerald mentioned this: “I will say that we don’t get enough school books as the kids in the mostly White schools do.” Even so, he still believed that Buchanan high possessed enough resources for all students who wanted to achieve and were willing to put in the effort to do so.

### *The Role of Peers*

Student responses indicated that in general, they did not view the support of their peers as essential to their academic success. When asked the question, “What does your academic achievement mean to you, your family, and your closest friends, only 25% of participants (n=4) responded to the part of the question that addressed friends. Of the students that did share, they made a distinction between “peers” and “friends”. Peers were seen as the part of the student body that participants did not seek (nor expect) approval from in order to succeed. Friends, on the other hand, were people that participants had connected with through shared experiences in and outside of the classroom, and to which participants had chosen to reveal important parts of their narratives. Friends played a supportive role in student academic development. George shared this point finely:

“As far as my peers are concerned, my achievements may not mean nothing to them. They doing them, tryna get theirs. They not stressing me. But I do have some friends that know what I been through and they tell me, ‘Yo, I’m proud of you. You on the come up.’ So that helps and that’s cool ‘cause I don’t let everybody into what’s going on in my life, but the ones that do know let me know that I’m doing good”.

In addition, several times during the focus groups, students made process comments that underscored the idea that as friends, they respected each other's ability to recover from difficult circumstances and prevail. Robert shared some thoughts about George:

"I'd like to speak on his behalf because him graduating is big. Me knowing you and knowing what you been through with jail and all of that, I think he speaks to a lot of the hardships that many of us go through. 'Cause think about it, you get locked up, go to jail and do time, the last thing you probably gone want to do is enroll back in high school and deal with a bunch of rules and people telling you what to do. People feel set back after jail and they want to play catch-up financially. They come home talking about let's get this money or whatever. But my man over here came home with the goal of finishing school and he almost there".

In terms of how peer relationships affected student disposition towards school, some youth (n=5) did cite peer pressure as a causal factor in behavioral problems and school disengagement. Gieno talked about the ridicule he received from other youth for appearing nerdy and not social enough, and how it affected his behavior:

"When I was younger I going to admit, I used to be a bookworm. I didn't have too many friends, I wasn't too outgoing. All I did was go to school, come home, and read, read, read. And like at school, the kids use to pick on me and call me names like bookworm and geek, Urkel and all that. And yeah, there was peer pressure, even in elementary school to not take school so seriously and just have fun, and I did act out at times cause I wanted to fit in".

Gerald shared about how appearing "not tough enough" to his peers negatively affected his relationship with school:

"Well I'd definitely have to say that the haters and the peer pressure got to me when I was a freshman because I'm kinda like a loner and so I guess because I wasn't really with the crowd a lot of people assumed that I was soft. It was like I had a sign that said 'target' on my back. I got into a lot of fights and I did not know how to stop it. I felt like people just used to always want to trigger me off, get me upset, see how much they could push me and so I pushed back and fought and fought. I mean, but I am glad that I had my family cause they kept telling me, 'you keep messing around and fighting everyone that says something that you do not like to you and you not gone graduate.' They were right cause I was in jeopardy of getting kicked out of the school freshman year. That kinda scared me

cause who wants to get kicked out of high school their freshman year cause what was I gonna do after that, you know? Then I had to make a decision. It's like I know what I can do in terms of fighting and stuff so I had to just change my attitude. I ignored a lot of stuff and people would be like, 'oh, you soft or whatever.' But I ain't really worry about that because I was thinking, 'that's what I want you to think.' I had to be hardcore all of my life, so what I need to be hardcore now for. My focus is on school. If I really need to knock someone out, I know that I could. I done it plenty of times before, but I am not going to because I really don't need to. When people talk reckless, I try my best to avoid even being part of the conversation. And now that I am doing so much better in school and my grades are up, I feel like I got a lot more people supporting me and now I am about the graduate and I feel like I can reach new heights and everything and so I want to go to college and I want to learn new things. I want to set goals for myself because I believe in my future. I know what I overcame to be here”.

Although peer pressure was commonplace at Buchanan high, student generated solutions to dealing included surrounding themselves with like-minded and supportive peers. For example, Robert shared about the importance of being grouped together in honors/ advanced placement classes with supportive peers. Through his words, it is also apparent that he partitioned students who are committed to their academic achievement from those who were not:

“I think that everyone would agree when we say that there are two [Buchanan highs]. Like you have your Buchanan with the honors and the AP classes and the kids that go to class consistently. Like me and (he names a bunch of the students in the focus group), we'll all go from one room to the next room. It's like we have our own little community. We are all in the honors classes and we want to be there. There's no major hating or competition because we are all in the same classes; we are at the same level and we want to see each other do well. But then you compare us to the kids that just want to walk the hallways and bag the girls and they lower our statistics. That's the really bad thing cause when you go to look up what the media has to say about our school, you see that we have overall low scores because the kids that don't wanna do nothing are lowering our test scores. I mean, I can honestly say that I had a class with everyone in here and everyone is smart, but not everyone in this school is motivated. I think that if more kids in this school were motivated, motivated like us, then we wouldn't look so bad on paper”.



### *The Norwood Community*

Participants viewed the Norwood Community as one of tremendous prospect and tragedy simultaneously. When comparing Norwood to other major cities in Connecticut, students' comments revealed that they all (n=16) identified Norwood as "more violent", "poorer", and as having more crime and gangs. Several students (n=4) shared that they had each lost a family member in Norwood; two student's fathers and the cousins of two students were murdered, respectively. In line with the experiences of several students, Ernest compared the sanctuary he felt when living in other Connecticut cities to the hostility he faced in Norwood:

"Yeah, we'll when I was younger, I used to be a real happy, funny kid. I liked school, I had a good attitude, I was just happy all the time. I spent my early years in [another city in Connecticut] and it was chill out there. You could be a kid, go outside, ride your bike, play kickball, or whatever. But then I moved to [Norwood] and it was just like another world. Like the first day in [Norwood], it's like everybody wanted to fight me for no reason. For no reason. People would just hate for no reason. And it wasn't like I was a big kid. I wasn't big like I am now. The kids would just bother me...guess cause they thought I wasn't tough cause I was smiling all the time. Then all of a sudden I just became violent and I don't know, I guess if I can think back I realize now that that's the way that I felt I had to be. I mean, at first my moms helped me out a lot. She would be like, 'just be calm, they're haters, don't pay them no mind.' But then after a while of just taking it from everyone, I was like just forget it. You hate on me and I'm gonna punch you in the face. But now, come on, I'm bout to be 18 years old, going to college out of state. I am really learning how to let what the haters say roll right off my back. I can say, 'just forget it' to a lot of stuff now. But I must admit that I do have my little episodes where I let my fuse get so short that I just lose it, but I try not to get out of control like that. That's why I play sports. That's why I started playing football. When I play football, I channel all of my anger and energy into the game. I take out all of my aggression on the field. That's the strategy that I came up with for dealing with the haters".

For the students in this study, success meant overcoming the ills of their neighborhood, which for most of them meant exposure to drug dealing and gang involvement. Students overwhelming contributed their peer's involvement in gang-life to

them “wanting to be recognized”, and shared that they themselves and their peers were uncomfortable with being overlooked or ignored. Participants agreed that many of their cohorts exhibited particular behavior to be recognized, even though those behaviors had negative impacts. For example, Gerald shared:

“I guess my biggest problem with people in the African American community is what some of our youth are doing. There are a lot of young kids, mad kids just trying to start new gangs in our community. It’s like it’s already dead and gone so I don’t understand why you trying start something up. Just leave it alone. Why you trying start some more fighting and killing. We are finally just getting over it. Why would you want to bring it back”?

As most of the students in his focus group nodded in agreement, Andre answered

Common’s question:

“Kids these days just want to be recognized. Like they started this gang called [name of gang omitted] in the school and on the block. [The gang] is stupid. Basically what it is is that you put a white flag up and that means that you have surrendered. Like it’s a stupid idea but the kids just want to be recognized for something. There’s really no point in that other than the fact that they want to be recognized”.

Student responses also indicated that the majority knew drug dealers in their neighborhoods and students who sold drugs in the school building. Some students mentioned that they had parent(s) that were on drugs (or who had been at some point) or had sold drugs. A small percentage of students (19%; n=2) disclosed that they had sold drugs at some point, and that the “lure of the streets”, that is, the desire for material possessions and to emulate the street-life” was the snare for them. In responding to a question about the lingering achievement gap between Black male students and all other students, George shared:

“Well I do agree that sometimes it’s a money thing...People compare fast money to school...It’s like what takes longer to achieve. And if your head is just stuck in the chicks, or the gear, or the here and now, then you gonna make bread and say

forget school. Freshman-year there was just a lot of things that I had my mind on. I mean, I wanted to do school work, but then I had to go chill on the block. I wanted to excel in school, but it's like I had obligations to the block. It's like growing up when you don't have a ... I mean, you got Black kids, like a lot of kids here, they don't have that father figure at home and so they go to the streets and see dude selling drugs on the corner and pulling up in that Benz or something. And that catches your eye and you like, 'Oh, I want to be like him. How he get that Benz...he always got bread' So yeah, it really goes back to what [others] was saying...It's like if you don't have a good support then that fast money is really gonna appeal to you and it will probably get you and then no, you not gone choose school".

Yet even in a city amid violence, poverty, gangs, crimes, and drugs, all of the students in this study (100%; n=16) still saw tremendous opportunity in Norwood. Student involvement in negatives activities were lessened/combated with positive experiences many community leaders and activities. The coaches and the co-facilitators of the YMLP represented some of the African-American men in the Norwood community that created positive images for the young men in this study. Ernest shared about his relationships with his first football coach and his present coach:

"I think that a major positive Black Role model for me was my first football coach ever. When I first started playing football he was right there. I remember when we played our first away game. He actually started crying and telling us how proud he was of all of us and like two days after that, he died. I remember that I could not believe it. I was like, 'really, he'd died?' His death crushed everybody. The whole team put suits on and went to his funeral and his obituary was full with the things that he had accomplished over his lifetime. I remember feeling really inspired to do so much. I mean this man coached the football team, he started a whole bunch of businesses, and he started from nothing. His family was real poor and when he died he had already had so much success. I really looked at him in a different light. And then my current coach-he helps a lot of young people out in the neighborhood. He gets respect from big Drug Dealers and the OGs. People like that even look up to him in the neighborhood. It's kinda like he gets validation from all over and he doing something positive. So you don't have to be out there hustling to get recognition".

Romeo spoke about the co-facilitators of the YMLP:

“Like [the YMLP co-facilitators], I look up to them as positive black male role models because they do this program and they are not getting paid for it. They live here too and are on the grind us like everybody else, but they make time for us for free. I think that this program is something that everyone should take advantage of because you don’t have to have \$200.00 to come into this program. It’s free and it’s beneficial and more kids should take advantage of it”.

### *Summary*

This data presented in this chapter reflects experiences related to academic attainment for sixteen high-achieving African-American male students who are in their graduating year at an urban public high school. Participants shared their perceptions regarding their individual characteristics that allowed for academic success, sources of social support, the availability of school and community resources, the “lure of street-life”, and other areas in their lives which have influenced their resiliency and ability to excel. The implications of these findings will be addressed and discussed in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to understand how high-achieving urban African-American male high school students are able to excel despite environmental factors faced at school, home, and in their community. The research questions that this study employed were (1) what impact do the school, peer, family, and community environments have on the resiliency of high-achieving Black male youth who attend a school in a high poverty area? (2) What relationships and support systems shape the behaviors, attitudes, and aspirations of African-American male students who reside in an urban environment? Major findings were the following: (1) Participants believed that they possessed the cognitive ability and willpower to do well in school and in their future. (2) They recognized education as the key ingredient needed to become and remain socially empowered, prominent, and successful. (3) Youth attributed their resiliency, or ability to bounce back under adverse circumstances and achieve, to the positive, supportive, and structured relationships that they maintained with friends, school staff, family members, and community members who verbalized and demonstrated their commitment to these youth.

This chapter draws upon theoretical literature and research literature to contextualize the above finding, which are woven in discussion under the following headings: resilient urban youth; family; school resources; teacher-student relationships; learning outside of the classroom; mentorship; peer relationships; the Norwood Community. The strengths and

limitations of this study follow, and implications for social work practice and recommendations for future research conclude this chapter.

### *Resilient Urban Youth*

According to Wang and Gordon (1994), resilient youth set goals and have a clear sense of purpose about their future agency in controlling their own fate. Similarly, participants believed that in spite of risk factors, the ability to achieve was a power that only they themselves could relinquish. This way of thinking allowed students to envision futures brighter than their current situations. For example, students referred to what the educational and social environments might look like in college as if higher education was the next logical step in pursuit of success. Students engaged in what Milner (2007) has coined “next level thinking”, the ability to prepare for “the unknown- the circumstances, experiences, situations, and opportunities beyond our current status” (Milner, 2007, p.241). He wrote: “As I come to understand visionary and next level education, success comes along the way in pursuit of excellence. We often experience success by pressing or pursuing new levels in our lives” (Milner, 2007, p.241).

The resiliency that all of the youth in this study possessed was grounded in a sense of purpose, optimism, maturity, individualism, and shared cultural values. Resilience was not intuitive trait for these students; rather their resilience was birthed and carefully cultivated by varied experiences that exposed participants to both protective and risk factors. This belief is in line with Rutter’s assertion that: “protection does not reside in the psychological chemistry of the moment but in the ways in which people deal with life changes and in what they do about their stressful or disadvantageous circumstances” (1987, p. 329). Bonner et al. too noted: “resilience is a concept that should be viewed as

evolving across the student's life continuum; this cultivation can mainly be facilitated by offering them protective processes at critical life junctures" (2008, p. 96). Undeniably, for participants, supportive family, school, and community conditions that operated at different life points endowed these youth with the fortitude to respond positively to perilous situations (Winfield, 1994).

### *Family*

Consistent with the findings of several studies that reveal family support as one of the most influential factors in determining the resilience of gifted African-American males (Bonner et al, 2008), family members of the youth in this study played a prominent role in their ability to overcome environmental barriers, obstacles, and hurdles in between them and academic achievement. Family involvement in these students' education looked like the following: caring parents, siblings, and extended family provided youth with effective role modeling and advice on how to navigate through difficult circumstances; family held youth to high standards of academic achievement; family connected with teachers and other vital school staff when necessary to ensure that there existed a continuity in expectations for achievement between the home and school environments. For many of the students, family members were concrete examples of struggle and triumph. Hence, effective role modeling on the part of families allowed students to establish the stamina within themselves to refuse negative behavior and instead work at achieving because they believed they could do since their relatives had already done so under harsher circumstances.

Conversely, poor modeling on the part of family members, and namely parents, was a huge factor in some of these students' decisions to devalue their schoolwork and

make negative decisions at different times in their academic careers. Fortunately for these students, other significant figures outside of the family emerged and served as dependable representations of accomplishment.

A surprising finding regarding the role of family members was that two of the young people shared that creating families by becoming fathers pushed them to be more responsible in school and in life. There is a need to understand the significance of this unexpected finding as the aim of the study was not to examine the relationship between academic achievement and African-American male teenage fatherhood.

#### *School Resources*

Based on the research literature that suggests that public schools in high-poverty areas are largely under-resourced, it was expected that students would share a belief that their high school possessed significantly fewer resources than did institutions in more affluent communities. To the converse, although students noted some differences in the availability of resources at their school compared to schools that drew in a larger white student population, they overwhelmingly felt that Buchanan possessed more than sufficient resources to help all students accomplish and successfully complete high school. Surprisingly, when it came to the issue of why more African-American youth in urban environments do not achieve at higher levels academically, participant frustrations was not with their school, but with the part of their cohort that did not take advantage of the school's academic and social support resources. Embedded in participants words were empathic responses towards the circumstances that some of their peers endured. Yet, these empathic responses were overridden with students words that underscored



their beliefs that taking advantage of the school supports could alleviate some outside stress and increase school engagement for many of these students.

Another finding was that was participant perception that not all students at their high school were encouraged to access the college preparatory curriculum. In fact, participants who were tracked into low-courses for a period reported that while in these courses, teachers had not made them aware of the comprehensive learning opportunities available to them. This finding is consistent with existing literature that suggest that access to opportunities, resources, and information is clearly shaped by school agents' beliefs about certain groups of students and their abilities (Griffin & Allen, 2006). While difficult for all African-American students, "frequent encounters with doubts about their academic abilities have been particularly frustrating and debilitating for high-achievers, resulting in diminished academic performance, and in the most extreme cases, and dis-identification with academic" (Griffin & Allen, 2006, p. 10).

#### *Teacher-Student Relationships*

The literature on teacher-student relationships clearly indicates that teacher expectations for student achievement have a powerful impact on student performance. When teachers lower or raise their expectations of student behavior and achievement, it influences students' self-understanding, self-love, and probably most important self-empowerment (Obiakor, 1999). Having caring teachers is essential for all students, especially students in urban classrooms (Irvine, 1990).

In general, the students perceived teachers at Buchanan high to be well-equipped educators who enjoyed their work and cared deeply about their students. The "love factor" was a phrase a participant used to describe the ethos of caring and accountability

that most teachers created with students. Although participants did recognize the cultural differences between themselves and most teachers (with most students being African-American and most teachers being White), an important finding was that participants were able to identify some teachers that gave their all to their students, regardless of race and gender. Milner and Howard (2004) wrote: “high expectations, deep caring for Black children, [and] belief in their capacity to succeed” can contribute to a cultural connection in the teaching and learning environment (p. 294 ).

Youth declared “the relationship” that exist between teachers and students as single most significant way teachers can cultivate academic success in students. Similar to the results of other studies (Milner, 2007), students in this study described effective relationships between themselves and teachers as ones in which teachers were able to relate to young people and empathize with their current circumstances while still holding high expectations for them. In fact, students heralded the teaches that refused to give up on them even when they experienced academic failure and personal woes as the most valuable educators; this is in line with what Milner posited when he wrote: “[the best] teachers refuse to grant their students the permission to fail. [They] speak possibility in the lives of students when they declare: ‘you can do it son.’” (Milner, 2007, p. 242).

Students were also able to identify a minority of teachers that held low expectations for students. They described these teachers as non-caring individuals who were “only [at Buchanan] for the paycheck.” Interestingly, many of these same teachers taught the low-tracked courses where student progression was rare. Similar to what Steele (1992) and others have expressed, participants shared that lack of social support and encouragement from these teachers did undermine the achievement of many of their

peers. Unfortunately, not many people manage to rise above the low expectations set for them, and lack of teacher support for many urban students only magnifies the feelings of hopelessness and marginalization they already experience outside of the school environment.

### *Learning Outside of the Classroom*

An interesting theme that emerged from the finding was the participants beliefs that a multi-disciplinary approach was needed to keep them engaged in school. This finding contributes to the work of other researchers whose studies have shown that “the educational community needs to move traditional, largely Eurocentric pedagogical methods to help close the achievement gap between African-American male students and their counterparts” (Fashola, 2005, p.3). As noted earlier, most urban classrooms still employ traditional, largely Eurocentric curricula, and coupled with dull instructional delivery, this culturally assaultive material oftentimes contributes to student disinterest in academics. More integrated approaches to learning, on the other hand, span across developmental, cognitive, affective, and social domains (West-Olantunji & Baker, 2006, p. 7) and contain a component of hands-on-training. Studies show that educational programs that include a hands-on-training, a connection to work, life-skills training, and a performance approach have been successful in the past at increasing the likelihood of students staying in school and graduating (Imel, 1993).

Results showed a positive correlation between student involvement in extra-curricular activities and their task engagement in classroom activities. For example, the transitional period of freshman-year marked a time of uncertainty and anxiety for virtually all of the youth in this study. However, pro-social behavior and school

engagement was increased through playing sports because being part of “the team” meant inclusion into a highly structured social arena where youth gained recognition and friendships, built self-esteem, and honed leadership and teamwork capabilities. In addition, the GPA requirement needed to stay on sports teams helped to strengthen the ethos of excellence and expectation of high achievement that most of the students in this study were already experiencing in their supportive relationships with teachers.

Braddock suggested that African American males who participate in sports are more likely to see themselves as contributing members of both their teams and their communities. Through sports and extracurricular activities, then, African American males begin to “conceptualize a new language in which engagement, high expectation, and moral decisions play a significant role in their quest toward becoming self-reliant human beings” (Fashola, 2005, p. 6).

### *Mentorship*

Especially for the young men in this study that were reared in single-parent households where their mother was the primary caregiver, there seemed to be an appreciation for the leaders of the Young Men’s Leadership group and other Black man (namely coaches) who acted as positive role models for students. Young Men’s Leadership Program (YMLP) played a central role in helping all of the students in their study appreciate the importance of academic acquisition. Tenets of the program included regarding “Blackness” as a source of inspiration and strength. Therefore, “unlike the finding of Hemmings (1996) who found African-American students were pressured to conform to negative things of ‘Blackness’” (Graham & Anderson, 2008, p.493), the African-American men that ran the YMLP helped participants to exhibit positive

behaviors of Blackness, which included work towards enhancing their own lives through community service, college preparation, and social awareness discussions.

The YMLP helped participants build self-esteem, develop ethnic pride, transition into adulthood, and develop a positive identity. The program also served to negate some of the risk factors faced by many urban Black youth (Bonner and Jennings, 2007). Students identified the relationships that existed among group members and with the group's co-facilitators as respectful, value, and affirming. For virtually all of the participants, the YMLP represented the only environment that they could enter and unload feelings other than anger amid other Black male youth. This finding is particularly important considering the fact that many African-Americans males are taught the "cool pose"- the skill that includes de-emphasizing and internalizing their feelings and handling their issues internally (Majors and Billson, 1992). The YMLP co-facilitators created process groups that helped students to see that externalizing feelings does not have to stand in contradiction to what it means to be a man or to be Black.

The benefits that that students gained from the YMLP were not surprising discoveries. For some time now, mentoring has been advanced as a means to aid African-American males who are struggling in academic achievement (Futrell, 2004). Furthermore, According to Bonner and Jennings (2007), mentoring programs like the YMLP have a longstanding history of cultivating and providing leadership experiences for African American males" (p. 34).

### *Peer Relationships*

Overall, research denotes "peer influences as playing "a momentous role in adolescents' dispositions towards school" (Somers et al., 2008, p.2). Academic support

from peers has been positively related to the pursuit of academic pro-social goals (Wentzel, 1994). For African-American students however, research indicates that there is a risk of receiving negative sanctions (i.e. ridicule) from peers for excelling academically (Somers et al., 2008). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) cited peer influence as having a negative impact on Black male student achievement. They argued that other African-American youth might view high achieving Black students as “acting White”.

Unexpectedly, the students involved in this study did not view the support of peers as essential to their academic success. A possible explanation for this finding could be that these students did not base their self-esteem largely on their peers’ perception of them. Instead, their self-esteem was developed through positive experiences with folks that declared opposition towards learning a cop-out and foolish framework. This reasoning is supported by other findings that show that some African-American students succeed academically in spite of disapproval from peers because they have developed a positive black identity that serves to combat the “negative performance expectation” (Somers et al., 2008, p. 2). Another explanation might be found in the distinction that participants made between friends and peers. Peers were part of the general student body at Buchanan; friends, on the other hand, were those with whom participants developed a close-knit community. Friends held similar goals of achievement in school and in extracurricular activities, and offered each other support and encouragement particularly when circumstances were grim. In this case, then the findings do correlate with existing literature that correlates students’ grade point average with peer support.

### *The Community*

The community that students in this study resided in was marred by many of the same vices that most Black youth who grow up in urban areas muddle through. There was poverty, poor housing, inadequate healthcare, unemployment/underemployment, drug abuse, gang violence, and other crime. However, amid all of this were working two-parent families and various community organizations that sought to empower youth economically, socially, and educationally. Students held the positive and supportive relationships that they maintained with adults and particularly Black male adults in the community as key to fostering a sense of hopefulness in youth when circumstances presented as bleak. In fact, several students credited their ability to overcome the ills of their neighborhoods, which included exposure to drug dealing and gang involvement, to their involvement in constructive activity with community leaders they viewed as role models, such as coaches and the facilitators of the Young Men's Leadership Group.

### *Strengths of the Study*

This qualitative study on the academic attainment and experiences of high achieving African-American male youth adds to the understanding of how environmental factors can both encourage and inhibit school engagement for these young people. This is particularly important because the principal reason cited for student dropout is a lack of engagement (Davidson, 1996; Mann, 1986; Rumberger, 1987). This study explores the positive connections to school that are “needed to enhance students’ sense of engagement and to prevent the bonding process from eroding” (Srebnik & Elias, p. 529). The value of this research is that it represents a “theoretical shift away from deficit-oriented

perspectives of Black male student underachievement to a broadened understanding of what successful African American youth look like” (Miller-Cribbs et al, 2002, p.1).

In terms of methodology, the purposive methods (chose of school site, inclusion criteria, etc.) employed to identify students for this study was optimal because it yielded participants that produced the best insight into this study’s research questions. The focus group format was favorable because it allowed respondents to talk freely and to choose descriptive words significant to them. Using student voices produced a form of inquiry that gave students validation as experts on their own narratives and achievement.

#### *Limitations of the Study*

This study has some limitations that need to be addressed in future research. One limitation is the fact that all of the students were a part of the Young Men’s Leadership Group. It is clear that participation in the program shaped the students views. Therefore, the findings may not apply to all high-achieving students at Buchanan high school. Another limitation resided with the sample size of the study. Although the sample size (n=16) is typical for the focus group format, it is limited and therefore the results of this study cannot be readily generalized to other contexts. This study was undertaken as an effort to understand the experiences of the students in a particular learning environment. Other focus groups with African-American students in similar contexts should be conducted to investigate whether the same factors that increased or hindered academic success for the students in this study are also present for them. A limitation of qualitative research is the fact that the investigator is the one that gathers and analyzes the data. As a human instrument, this study’s researcher was limited and fallible, and bound to “make



mistakes, miss opportunities, and allow personal biases to influence data collections and conclusions” (Corey & Bower, 2005, p. 3).

The researcher is an African-American woman who is from an inner-city community similar to one of the study’s participants. In introducing the importance and the need for this type of study to the participants, the researcher was transparent in about her passionate interest in the resiliency of young African-American male students. As a member of a racial group of people that has responded to horrendous discrimination and oppression with extreme resilience and resourcefulness, she shared that she held a deep connection and sense of responsibility to other African-Americans. Additionally, she added that her own experiences as an African-American in an urban public school prompted her to do work that uses student voices to shed light on their educational experience. It is unknown how the race and perceived social class of the researcher may have affected students’ responses to questions and the general dynamic the focus groups.

#### *Implications for Social Work Practice*

Based on the findings of this research, several recommendations are suggested for social workers working with African-American male youth. First, social workers need to be reminded of their important influence in urban public schools. School social worker positions at urban high schools are multidimensional and fluid; their work shifts with the needs of students and staff, and in addition to being counselors, they are also mediators, group co/facilitators, active team members, advisors, and advocates for students. Consequently, social workers are in a significant position to collaborate with other support staff, teachers, administrators, and indeed the students themselves to enhance student academic success.

To be influential in increasing African-American male student achievement, social workers can: (1) Continue research that uncovers environmental factors that impact Black male youth academic and overall achievement. (2) Help students to connect school achievement with later-life success by establishing partnerships with local organizations that will provide youth with vocational training and internships opportunities tied to their areas of interest. (3) Orchestrate the process of setting up anti-racist committees at urban schools that look at the ways that racism plays out in these contexts (i.e. tracking, school discipline, teacher expectations, etc.). (4) Establish relationships with child welfare agencies and the local juvenile justice systems with the goal of providing the best services to meet the needs of students and their families. (5) Enlist the volunteer services of adults of color to act as role models of achievement for students, and have these adults as guest speakers, co-facilitators of afterschool groups, and active participants in mentoring programs. (6) Broaden parent-school relationships; one way to accomplish this goal is to encourage family involvement in school-based activities. (7) Become part of the interview board tasked with hiring competent, multi-ethnic educators who can forge a caring and engaging relationship with students. Given the cultural uniqueness of Black men and their short supply as teachers, thorough consideration should be given to increasing the number of Black male teachers (Jordan & Cooper, 2003). (8) Work closely with educators to dismantle their generalizations about the academic ability, sense of agency, and level of concern low-income African-American youth and their families have regarding education. (9) Implement mandatory curricula for students at all levels that: (a) addresses topics such as money management, legal rights, communication, job attainment and retention, anger management, and problem solving skills; (b) invite

students on field trips where they can practically implement acquired skills (i.e. visiting a business to interview for a job). (10) Encourage all staff to display messages throughout the entire school building that celebrates the academic success of students in the same way that their athletic prowess is celebrated.

### *Conclusion*

To be Black and male in American schools places one at risk for a variety of negative consequences: school failure, special education assignment, suspensions, expulsions, and violence (Ferguson, 2000). A third of college-aged, African-American males are unemployed or under the direct supervision of a rapidly proliferating criminal justice system. They represent 47% of all prisoners and just 3.5% of the nation's college students. The young people in this study are remarkable in that they continue to thrive in a school and residential community that appears to the uninformed observer as overcome with tremendous risk factors. These resilient students prevailed academically in part because they possessed a strong sense of self and understood the essence of taking advantage of opportunity amidst peril. As one student shared, "the adversity is crazy, but you gotta surround yourself with good people".

Indeed, perhaps it truly does take a "village to educate a child" (Fremon & Hamilton, 1997, p.121). The encouraging and consistent relationships that existed between participants and friends, family, school staff, and community members helped these youth to view their self-worth as important and their locus of control as relatively high. Consequently, as high-achieving students, these young Black urban males were not anomalies, but standards of success.

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## Appendix A

### Human Subject Review Approval Letter

February 2, 2009

Lashauna Cutts

Dear Lashauna,

Your amended materials have been reviewed and you have taken care of all of our suggested revisions. All is now in order and we are glad to give final approval to this very interesting and ambitious study. It should result in very interesting and useful findings.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your project. We hope you get an enthusiastic response from your potential participants.

Sincerely,

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.  
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Colette Duciaume-Wright, Research Advisor

## Appendix B

### Informed Consent Form

February 2009

Dear Participant:

Hello, I am Lashauna Cutts, a Graduate student pursuing my Master's degree in Social Work (MSW) at Smith College School for Social Work. I am conducting a research study that seeks to understand how high-achieving urban African-American male students are able to succeed academically despite factors faced at school, home, and in their communities. Through student voices, I want to answer the following question: What does it take to be African-American, male, and a graduating senior at an urban public high school? The research I collect will be used for my MSW thesis and for possible presentation and publication.

I would like you to participate in this study because you meet the following criteria: (1) racially, you self-identify as at least half African-American/Black; (2) you have an overall high school Grade Point Average (G.P.A.) of at least a B (or 3.0) or 80%; (3) you are between the ages of 17-19 years old; (5) you attend a public high school in an urban area and you live in that same city. Participation in this study is in the form of a focus group. A focus group is a form of research where a group of people is asked about their attitude towards a product, service, concept, or idea. Each focus group will consist of 6-8 participant and last for 2 hours. I would like you to participate in one focus that I will facilitate the group. I will ask you to respond to questions that pertain to how you have experienced high school. A professional will video-record the group.

Although the potential risks involved for participation in this study are small, they do exist. This study seeks to examine what factors African-American male student identify as affecting their academic achievement. Therefore, parts of students' answers could include bad-mouthing of certain school staff, family members, community organizations, and other peers. If you attend the same school or live in the same neighborhood as others in the group, it might be discomfoting for you to hear others talk negatively about people and institutions that you know. Lastly, as I will ask you to share some of your experiences you may share stories of child abuse and neglect. If you do and you are under the age of 18 years old, I am obligated to report incidences of child maltreatment.

You may gain by participating in this study. Students can freely respond to each other's comments during the focus group and you may gain new perspectives. You will have the opportunity to share your school experiences with people which you have a racial, gender, and achievement commonality. You might also benefit by knowing that your participation in this study will contribute to the development of knowledge that will be helpful to others. Your voice is important and needs crucially to be added to the

discussion on ways to close the achievement gap between black male and all other students. I will offer you pizza and soda at the beginning of the focus group.

I will preserve your confidentiality in this study in a number of ways. I will change all high school names and names of the cities where the studies will take place. As the researcher, I will personally transcribe the data from all of the focus groups and will change each student's name during that process. Only my research advisor and I will have access to the data, and my research advisor will only have access once I have removed all identifying information. I will keep tapes, notes, and the results of the study secure in a locked file cabinet for three years per federal guidelines. After that time, the data will either be destroyed or continue to be kept secured as long as I need it. I will destroy the data when I no longer need it. When I present my thesis at Smith College, I will prepare presentations and publications in such a way that participants will not be identified. I will present data as a whole and when illustrative quotes or vignettes are used, they will be carefully disguised.

Participation in the study is voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time during the data collection process without penalty. However, if you decide to withdraw from the study once the focus group has begun, it will not be possible to remove your contributions from the data. You have the right to refuse to answer any question without penalty. I encourage you to contact me at [lcutts@email.smith.edu](mailto:lcutts@email.smith.edu) if you have concerns about your rights or about any aspect of the study. You may also contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at (413) 585-7974.

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Contact Information:

Lashauna Cutts  
1(347) 385-9066  
[lcutts@email.smith.edu](mailto:lcutts@email.smith.edu)

\*Please keep a copy of this form your personal records.

Thank you for your participation in this study.

## Appendix C

### Guardian Informed Consent Form

February 2009

Dear Guardian(s):

Hello, I am Lashauna Cutts, a Graduate student pursuing my Master's degree in Social Work (MSW) at Smith College School for Social Work. I am conducting a research study that seeks to understand how high-achieving urban African-American male students are able to succeed academically despite factors faced at school, home, and in their communities. Through student voices, I want to answer the following question: What does it take to be African-American, male, and a graduating senior at an urban public high school? The research I collect will be used for my MSW thesis and for possible presentation and publication.

I would like your son/ward to participate in this study because he meets the following criteria: (1) racially, he self-identifies as at least half African-American/Black; (2) he has an overall high school Grade Point Average (G.P.A.) of at least a B (or 3.0) or 80%; (3) he is between the ages of 17-19 years old; (5) he attends a public high school in an urban area and he lives in that same city. Participation in this study is in the form of a focus group. A focus group is a form of research where a group of people is asked about their attitude towards a product, service, concept, or idea. Each focus group will consist of 6-8 participant and last for 2 hours. I would like your son/ward to participate in one focus that I will facilitate the group. I will ask him to respond to questions that pertain to how he has experienced high school. A professional will video-record the group.

Although the potential risks involved for participation in this study are small, risk do exist. This study seeks to examine what factors African-American male student identify as affecting their academic achievement. Therefore, parts of students' answers could include bad-mouthing of certain school staff, family members, community organizations, and other peers. If your son/ward attends the same school or lives in the same neighborhood as others in the group, it might be discomfoting for him to hear others talk negatively about people and institutions that he knows. Lastly, as I will ask your son/ward to share some of his experiences, there is the possibility that he may share stories of child abuse and neglect. If he does and is under the age of 18 years old, I am obligated to report incidences of child maltreatment.

Your son/ward may gain by participating in this study. Students can freely respond to each other's comments during the focus group and you may gain new perspectives. He will have the opportunity to share his school experiences with people which he has a racial, gender, and achievement commonality. He may also benefit by knowing that his participation in this study will contribute to the development of knowledge that will be helpful to others. Your son's/ward's voice is important and needs crucially to be added



to the discussion on ways to close the achievement gap between black male and all other students. I will offer your son/ward pizza and soda at the beginning of the focus group.

I will preserve your son/ward's confidentiality in this study in a number of ways. I will change all high school names and names of the cities where the studies will take place. As the researcher, I will personally transcribe the data from all of the focus groups and will change each student's name during that process. Only my research advisor and I will have access to the data, and my research advisor will only have access once I have removed all identifying information. I will keep tapes, notes, and the results of the study secure in a locked file cabinet for three years per federal guidelines. After that time, the data will either be destroyed or continue to be kept secured as long as I need it. I will destroy the data when I no longer need it. When I present my thesis at Smith College, I will prepare presentations and publications in such a way that participants will not be identified. I will present data as a whole and when illustrative quotes or vignettes are used, they will be carefully disguised.

Participation in the study is voluntary. Your son/ward may withdraw from the study at any time during the data collection process without penalty. However, if he decides to withdraw from the study once the focus group has begun, it will not be possible to remove his contributions from the data. Your son/ward has the right to refuse to answer any question without penalty. I encourage you to contact me at lcutts@email.smith.edu if you have concerns about your rights or about any aspect of the study. You may also contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at (413) 585-7974.

**YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.**

Guardian's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Contact Information:

Lashauna Cutts  
1(347) 385-9066  
lcutts@email.smith.edu

\*Please keep a copy of this form your personal records.

Thank you for your participation in this study.

Appendix D  
Brief Student Questionnaire

1. Name:

---

2. Age:

---

3. What Ethnicity Are You?

---

4. What Norwood Public School Do You Attend?

---

5. What Is Your Overall Grade Point Average (GPA)?

---

6. What Advanced Placement Classes Have You Taken At Your High School?

---

7. Have You Attended The Same High School For All Four Years? (If You Answer "No" To This Question, What Other High Schools Have You Attended?).

---

8. Describe The Composition Of Your Household: How Many People Live In Your House And What Is Each Person's Relationship To You?

---

\*The pseudonym "Norwood" is used instead of the real name of the city

Appendix E



**Attention:**  
**Are YOU a Black/African-American  
Male Student That's Making it Happen  
in  
High School?**

- ✓ **You Attend a Norwood Public High School**
- ✓ **You Are in Your Senior Year**
- ✓ **You have an overall GPA of at least 80%  
(3.0/ B)**

**I am conducting a Research Study that will use  
African-American Male Student Voices to answer  
the following question:**

***What does it take to be African-American, Male,  
and a Graduating Senior at an Urban Public High  
School?***

**If you are interested in participating in this  
study, I will ask you to participate in a 2-hour  
confidential focus group.**

**Please Contact Lashauna Cutts  
[lcutts@email.smith.edu](mailto:lcutts@email.smith.edu)**

\*The pseudonym "Norwood" is used instead of the real name of the city

Appendix F

**Counseling Resources for Norwood Study Participants**

<b>Resource Name</b>	<b>Address Services</b>	<b>Offered Telephone</b>	<b>Number</b>
<b>Connecticut Mental Health Center</b>	34 Park St. Norwood, CT 06519	Programs for brief treatment, crisis intervention, inpatient units, intermediate and long-term outpatient care, case management, and the co-occurring disorders.	(203) 974-7300
<b>Connecticut Mental Health Center -The Hispanic Clinic</b>	1 Long Wharf Norwood, CT 06511	Substance abuse interventions, mental health treatment, outpatient family psycho-education, alcohol prevention, and peer support services	(203) 974-5800
<b>Connecticut Mental Health Center -West Norwood Mental Health Clinic</b>	270 Center St. West Norwood, CT 06516	Evaluation, treatment, medication, and community consultation for children and adults.	(203) 974-5900
<b>Waterbury Hospital - Child and Adolescent Behavioral Health Services</b>	88 Grandview Avenue, Waterbury, CT 06708	Psychiatric day treatment for youth.	(203) 573-7121 – Adolescent Program
<b>Family Intervention Center – Natural Peer Helpers/Mediators Program</b>	1875 Thomaston Avenue, Waterbury, CT 06704	Adolescent/youth counseling.	(203) 753-2153

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## Appendix G

### Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

1. According to several studies and media outlets, young Black men are known as an “endangered population.” High school dropout rates, joblessness, and incarceration for young African-American men are at alarming highs, and a street culture of swagger reinforces these conditions as “normal.” When you hear this, what kinds of thoughts come to mind?
2. What do you think accounts for the drastic differences in academic achievement between Black male students and everybody else?
3. Because you are high-achieving Black male students who are in your graduating year at an inner-city school, many consider you all part of a rare group. What does your academic achievement mean to you? What does it mean to your family? What does it mean to your closest friends?
4. Think back to some fears that you might have had about coming into high school. Can you recall some of those fears now?
5. You all attend schools that are mostly made up of students of color (Blacks and Latinos). How do you think that fact affects the type of resources and opportunities at your schools?
6. What are your relationships like with the people that you live with (parents, siblings, extended family members), and how do these relationships affect your behavior in school?
7. How do you think the community that you live in has affected the type of education that you have received?
8. What are some things about who you are as an individual that you think helped you to do well in high school?
9. What adults in your life have the most positive influences on you, and what behaviors do these adults exhibit that contribute to your ability to succeed?
10. Which have staff members at school (teachers, administrators, school counselors, etc.) done that has made the biggest impact on your life?
11. How do your teachers’ expectations of you influence your learning?

12. How do you think your teachers have made efforts to incorporate African-American culture into lesson plans?
13. What have your experiences been like with teachers of color (particularly African-American teachers); have these teachers taught any of your science or math classes?
14. To what extent do you feel like the classes that you took and the extra-curricular activities at your school have prepared you for college?
15. How do your peers feel about your academic achievement? Are they supportive of your success or do they hate?
16. What kinds of extra-curricular school sponsored activities are you involved in? How do these activities influence your ability to do well in school?
17. What community organizations outside of school are you involved in (church, employment, Young Men's Group, etc)? How does your participation in these activities affect your ability to do well as school?
18. What about the haters- other students, teachers, or people in your community that have tried to put you down for doing well: what experiences do you have with these people and what is your general way of handling people like that?
19. What have your relationships been like with older African-American males in your family? Community?
20. How do you prefer to learn and have your teachers took note of your learning style and tried to support it?
21. What is your pattern for completing your schoolwork?
22. Any topics that you want to discuss that I did not address? Anything that you want to add?