

BLACK MALE GRADUATES OF URBAN HIGH SCHOOLS IN NEW JERSEY: AN
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ABSTRACT

A qualitative exploratory study was completed to examine factors and processes associated with high school graduation among Black males in high risk urban contexts. Participants included 11 Black males between the ages of 19 and 35, who have graduated from high schools in some of New Jersey's poorest and dejected urban districts. These Black men were interviewed to determine what protective factors and processes contributed to their school persistence. Additionally, the study sought to examine commonalities among these men that led to high school graduation. Analysis of these interviews was completed using the grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1997) and case study method (Yin, 2009). Results indicate that there are a number of important factors and processes that contributed to the participants' ability to complete high school in environments where up to 65% of Black males fail to graduate. Broad themes associated with school persistence among these men included individual, family, peer, community and teacher factors. More specifically, the results revealed that the role of mothers in the lives of these young men was substantial. In fact, the majority of participants credit their mothers for their success. This is counter to much of the research that discredits single parent mothers. As well, these young men did not come from highly educated families, but there was a tremendous emphasis on education within their homes. Consistent with other work in this area, participants indicated that access to, and utilization of, community resources was vital to their success. The importance of the school environment, as well as the importance of support and availability of school staff and teachers was emphasized repeatedly. Other specific themes and commonalities are

presented. Implications of these findings are discussed and recommendations are made to young Black men, parents, teachers and other school professionals.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background

The state of Black men in our society today is a dire one. The disparities that exist between African American men and their White counterparts are tremendous. In fact, the National Urban League (2007) notes that when compared to their White counterparts in education, health, and social justice, the African American male continues to lag behind. Black men are "...more than twice as likely to be unemployed as White males and make only 75% as much a year" (National Urban League, 2007, p.2). Furthermore, Black men are seven times more likely to be incarcerated and nine times more likely to die of homicide than White men.

To what can we attribute these conditions? Many posit that these ghastly statistics come as a result of impoverished living conditions, poor academic preparation, the widening achievement gap, the ever increasing high school dropout rate and overall failures of public education in urban school districts. (Nealy, 2008; Treadwell & Nottingham, 2005; Voelkl, Welte & Wiezorek, 1999). In fact, Brooks-Gunn, Guo and Furstenberg (1993) note that "educational attainment is one of the most potent predictors of life course trajectories in adulthood" (p. 272). The common thread among African

American males who are incarcerated, unemployed or victims of homicides appears to be a lack of education.

Dropouts

The dropout rate among all high school students in the United States is a significant problem. At present, nearly one third of all students are failing to graduate from high school (Redditt, 2005). These rates are even more abysmal in urban areas, where the numbers of students graduating from high school versus the number of students dropping out of high school are, at best, one to one (Campbell, 2004). Dropping out of high school is a problem that affects all social groups, but African American students, particularly African American males, generally have a higher dropout rate than most other social groups (Campbell, 2004; Nealy, 2008; Pluviose, 2008; Smith, 2004;). “The dropout rate of Asians, Pacific Islanders and Whites remained lower than that of Blacks in 2003” (NCES, 2004). Some studies show dropout rates for Blacks overall are as high as 70%, where Blacks make up only 12% of the total population (Campbell, 2004; Tucker & Herman, 2002).

The disparaging high school dropout rate among Black males is certainly not a new phenomenon. It has been an issue for many years, but received little attention from the nation at large. Today, because significantly more than half of all Black men in inner cities fail to finish high school (Brooks-Gunn, et al., 1993; Burch, 1992; Roderick, 1993; Roderick, 2003; Tucker & Herman, 2002; Whaley & Smyer, 1998), much more attention is being given to this problem within the public media. In fact, it is being called a national crisis (Pluviose, 2008; Swanson, 2008). Now the dropout rate is being

examined to determine its relationship to the high Black male prison population, the high unemployment rate of Black men, and even the increasing absenteeism of Black fathers. The reality that this is not simply a problem affecting Black students in distressed areas has triggered national attention. To address this crisis, many urban cities, including Philadelphia and Baltimore, have held “Call to Action” summits. These summits were held with the intention of reversing the disparities in school dropout rates through the development of concrete action plans to remedy the crisis. (Jones, 2008; Pluviose, 2008).

According to one source, in 2000, 65 percent of Black male high school dropouts in their 20's were jobless - that is, unable to find work, not seeking it or incarcerated (Nealy, 2008). By 2004, that percentage had grown to 72 percent, compared with 34 percent of white and 19 percent of Hispanic dropouts (Eckholm, 2006; Nealy, 2008). Eckholm goes on to note that even when high school graduates were included, 50% of Black men in their 20's were jobless. White males, on the other hand, who dropped out of high school report more positive economic outcomes than Black male dropouts (Voelkl, et al., 1999).

The epidemic of the Black male high school dropout stretches far beyond unemployment rates, and includes incarceration rates as well. In 1995, 16 percent of Black men in their 20's who did not attend college were in jail or prison; by 2004, 21 percent were incarcerated. By their mid-30's, 6 in 10 Black men who had dropped out of school had spent time in prison. (Eckholm, 2006). In fact, Treadwell and Nottingham (2005) note that one out of every five African American men born between 1965 and 1969 served time in prison by the time they reached their early 30s. They also note that 60% of African American high school dropouts born during the same time period served

time in state or federal prisons by their early 30's. According to the 2000 Census, on any given day, more Black male dropouts in their late 20s were in prison than at a legal paying job. Black men now make up more than 70% of the total prison population, but only 6% of population of the United States (Nealy, 2008).

Graduates

Lee and Burkam (2000) noted that "...students who are members of racial and ethnic minority groups drop out at higher rates than white students, as do those from low-income families, from single-parent households, and from families in which one or both parents did not complete high school" (p.4). Despite the jarring numbers of Black male drop outs, there are a considerable number of Black males from urban areas who do persist in high school and go on to graduate. They are able to succeed in spite of their exposure to dropout "risk factors."

Determining what qualities and commonalities exist in those students who stay in school and prove to be successful in the same settings where dropouts experience difficulties is essential. Barnes (1992) argues that there is a profile for African American "stay-ins" that includes "...their personal traits, family, school and environment" (p.93). Personal traits included factors such as age, attitudes, educational and economic goals and their definition of success. Barnes noted that stay-ins often experienced difficulties in high school, but remained determined. She also noted that 90% of stay-ins tend to have a positive attitude which prevented them from dropping out of school. Educational goals were significant traits in the stay in profiles. In fact, the majority of stay-ins

(60.9%) planned on pursuing a college degree. As well, 98.3% of these stay-ins stated that success meant securing a good-paying job.

Purpose of the Study/ Rationale

The aim of this qualitative study was to explore profiles and critical themes that lead to high school retention among Black males in New Jersey's urban school districts. A study of this type will be a significant addition to the current body of literature. In reviewing the literature on high school attrition and retention among Black males, it became clear that many studies were based almost exclusively on quantitative analysis. Such studies fail to examine the unique, individual experience. Few studies have been qualitative in nature, allowing for examination of underlying reasons and circumstances. Even fewer studies have explored the experiences of those Black men who graduate; instead, most studies focus on Black males who drop out. Furthermore, there is no known qualitative research spotlighting the lived experiences of Black male graduates from urban areas in New Jersey. By exploring these experiences, this study will ultimately add a unique perspective on the current literature on attrition and retention.

The rationale for this study is to determine what factors led to these Black males' decision to remain in school. Understanding their experiences and hearing these stories, can assist school administrators, policy makers and parents in providing services and solutions for Black males to increase their likelihood of success in school. More specifically, the data collected can assist school administrators and policy makers to obtain insight to keep Black men in school. Obtaining information specifically on the home and family life of the participants will assist parents in understanding the

relationship between the home and school life, as it relates to retention and attrition. Lastly, obtaining more information about the lives and experiences of Black male graduates will guide the development and implementation of intervention strategies to improve the retention rate.

Exploratory Research

This study was exploratory in nature. Although there is an abundance of literature on African American males and the drop out epidemic, there is little to no literature that focuses primarily on Black male graduates. Furthermore, there is not a body of literature that investigates the commonalities or lived experiences of Black male graduates in New Jersey's urban districts. New Jersey boasts one of the highest overall graduation rates in the country. In fact, in his 2007 State of the State address, Governor Jon Corzine proudly stated that "We have the highest high school graduation rates in the nation." Furthermore, New Jersey has the fourth highest overall African American graduation rate of 66% (Greene, 2002). Despite this overall graduation rate, the graduation rates of Black males in New Jersey's urban districts have been reported as low as 34% (Ponessa, 1991). As such, it offers a unique place to focus on research due to the discrepancy between their overall graduation rate and graduation rates of African American men in urban areas, like Newark, Trenton, Irvington, etc. What can be learned from the Black men who attend and graduate from schools in urban areas of New Jersey will likely provide significant insight into the current crisis.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Current literature indicates that high school dropout rates among Black males far exceed national averages (Eckholm, 2006; Murray & Naranjo, 2008; Pluviose, 2008; Roderick, 1993; Swanson, 2004; Swanson, 2008). This disparity is even more astonishing when one examines the dropout rate of Black males in urban areas. An even more dismal picture is painted when one considers the fact that the dropout problem is far worse than statistics indicate (Greene, 2002; Murray & Naranjo, 2008; Orfield, 2006; Swanson, 2004; Swanson, 2008). Many states misrepresent the extent of the dropout problem. Swanson (2006 & 2008) and Greene (2002) note that this is largely caused by a methodology that continues to count General Equivalency Diploma (GED) graduates and others with alternative credentials as high school graduates; a knowingly flawed method of gathering graduation and drop out data; and self-reporting bias regarding levels of educational attainment.

Why do some students drop out of school while others persist and graduate?

Current literature appears to explain this phenomenon based on three different conceptual frameworks. These three frameworks are useful in understanding this complex epidemic. One framework is based on an individual perspective. This perspective focuses on

individual factors associated with dropping out. This perspective is based primarily on what happens at home and in the personal environment, not because of what happens at school. The second framework is also based on an individual perspective, but argues that the path to dropping out is different for every student and is the manifestation of a nest of problems, influenced by family background, school failure and unresponsiveness of school systems. The primary difference between the two individual frameworks is that framework #1 does not recognize the role of schools in the decision to drop out, while framework #2 recognizes it as an important part of the decision to drop out. The third framework is based on an institutional perspective that focuses on factors found within the school. The argument is that the decision to drop out is influenced by the structure, organization and policies of the school. These three frameworks will be discussed at length in the following pages.

Framework #1: Individual

The first framework is based on an individual perspective that focuses on the individuals' experiences at home and in their personal lives. This framework argues that the decision to graduate is one based on personal values, attitudes and behaviors. This theory goes further to suggest that the school does not play a role in the student's decision to drop out. Rather, this decision comes as a result of personal characteristics, including demographic variables like race and ethnicity, low educational and occupational aspirations, and teenage parenthood (Roderick, 1993).

Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack and Rock (1986) found that the path to dropping out is related to "demographics, family educational support, behavior, ability and attitudes" (p.

364). They go on to note that the student's home environment has a critical influence on the decision to leave school. Ekstrom and his colleagues do not place any responsibility or accountability on the school to evaluate the role of the schooling process on the Black male's decision to drop out.

Others that subscribe to this framework note that dropping out is a long-term process influenced by factors that are present even before schooling begins. Several longitudinal studies, including one study by Brooks-Gunn, et al (1993), have examined predictors of dropping out prior to first grade. Brooks-Gunn and her colleagues sought to explore antecedents of dropping out of high school. Their sample was based on a multi-generational study of teenage mothers, their mothers and their first-born children. In a twenty-year follow up, 254 first-born children were studied and predictors of completing high school versus not completing high school were estimated. Potential antecedents to dropping out included a number of family factors that are present before schooling even begins. More specifically, family circumstances, inclusive of welfare use and presence of father or grandmother; maternal commitment to education; and child's preschool cognitive ability were potential antecedents. Results indicated that the number of years the father was present, high maternal educational aspirations in the child's first year of life, and being prepared for school were predictive of completing high school. Few years on welfare, high pre-school cognitive ability, and attendance in preschool were predictive of continuing beyond high school.

Others note that community and peer factors greatly influence the decision to drop out of school. There is empirical evidence that suggests that apart from the influence of families, differences in neighborhood characteristics can help explain differences in the

drop out rate (Brooks-Gunn, et al., 1993; Williams, Davis, Cribbs, Saunders & Williams, 2002).

Framework #2: Individual (with school factors)

A second individual framework posits that although the decision to drop out is an individual decision, it comes as a result of a multiplicity of factors including personal, home and school factors. The decision to drop out as a result of these factors is not wholly on the individual.

Fine (1991) indicates that in addition to economic and social factors, structural features of the school influence the dropout epidemic. Roderick (1993) found that the decision to drop out comes as a result of a long term process that includes both social and academic performance. She examined school transcripts for academic grades, social grades and attendance for students in a small urban district in Massachusetts. It was revealed in an examination of grades from fourth grade until students dropped out, that there was a trend of declining grades. As well social grades and attendance show similar patterns.

Several studies have shown that grade retention significantly increases the likelihood of dropping out (Brook-Gunns et al., 1993; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Roderick, 1994). This is the case even if retention occurs in lower grades. Rumberger (1995) found that students who were retained in grades one to eight were four times more likely to drop out between grades eight and ten than students who were not retained, even after controlling for socioeconomic status, eighth grade school performance, and other background and school factors.

Framework #3: Institutional

In an attempt to provide causal models concerning the dropout phenomena, many researchers have found that school factors are the primary cause of the students' decision to drop out (Fine, 1991; Rumberger, 1995; Scott, Ingles, Sehra, Taylor & Jergovic, 1996). These factors include the school structure, organizational effects, school climate and policies.

Rumberger (1995) has spearheaded much of the research that espouses this framework. In a series of quantitative studies, Rumberger has found that early dropout behavior is related to school demographic composition, school structure, school organization and school climate. Several other studies have found school influences to be predictors of dropping out (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000). Battin-Pearson et al. note that school bonding is also linked to academic achievement.

Lee and Burkam (2003) explored how high schools, through their structures and organization, influence student's decision to stay in or drop out of school. They point out that although traditional explanations for dropout behavior have focused primarily on the student's social background and academic behaviors, the role of the school's curriculum, size and social relations are paramount. The researchers studied 3,840 students from 190 urban and suburban schools and found that school size, curriculum and social relations have a significant effect on the decision to drop out. More specifically, they found that students are less likely to drop out of schools that offer primarily academic courses. They also found that enrollment in schools with fewer than 1500 students increased the likelihood of high school retention. Lastly, they found that the greatest determining

factor is the relationship between teachers and students. When relationships between students and teachers are positive, students are less likely to drop out.

Other Factors

Although much of the research attempting to identify causal rationales for the drop out crisis appears to fall into one of the above mentioned frameworks, many others note that we cannot definitively say what trajectories lead to dropping out or to graduation. (Janosz, Archambault, Morizot, & Pagani, 2008). Battin-Pearson et al. (2000), also attempted to test a number of theories related to the dropout crisis. They note that the likelihood of dropping out increases as a combination of risk factors become more multifaceted. There is no mutually exclusive explanation as to why some students drop out and others go on to graduate.

Personal Relational Network

The importance of relationships and support systems is a recurring theme in the literature on graduation and academic success among poor and minority students. Students who have support from personal relational networks are more likely to meet success (Coleman, 1990; Goddard, 2003; Schaefer-McDaniel, 2004). The size and nature of these networks differ from child to child and may include social networks and interpersonal relationships within the community. It can also be inclusive of relationships between teachers and students, between students and their parents, and among students and their peers. This social capital, as it has come to be called, is “...one’s ability to utilize past associations, to network, and to marshal resources....”

(Malone, 2008). The benefits derived from social capital rely heavily on the size and availability of the network. The thought behind the personal relational network then, is that success is based on relationships not the individual. In speaking of relational networks and the importance of social capital, Coleman (1990) writes:

There is a broadly perpetuated fiction in modern society...the fiction is that society consists of a set of individuals, each of whom acts to achieve goals that are independently arrived at....The fiction derives in part from the fact that the only tangible actors in society are individuals...It also derives from the fact that social changes have moved modern society toward a structure in which individuals act more independently than they did in the past...Despite these changes, the fiction is just that—for individuals do not act independently, goals are not independently arrived at, and interests are not wholly selfish. (pp. 300-301).

Undoubtedly, the academic success of individual students is in large part due to personal characteristics. However, it is equally true that student's access to members of their school community, family, and community members, helps to facilitate success in school. It is these personal relational networks and social capital that Coleman (1990) refers to above. Strong relationships and availability and accessibility to supports can have positive effects on students' academic success.

Goddard (2003) notes that students' odds of academic success are increased in urban schools characterized by high levels of social capital. He goes on to add that students are better off in these schools than in those "...undermined by low levels of trust and the conspicuous absence of supportive adults" (p. 71).

Qian and Blair (1999) attempted to explore the importance of human (parental education), financial (parental income) and social capital across different social groups. They found that human and financial capital had stronger impacts on educational aspirations for Whites than for minorities. Moreover, they found that social capital had

the strongest impact on educational aspirations for African Americans. Parental involvement in school activities, which is one measure of social capital, more than other factors, impacted African American students' aspirations. These findings support previous studies that emphasize the importance of social capital and relational networks in African American communities.

Several other studies, including one by Croninger and Lee (2001), provide evidence for the importance of social capital. They found that the strength of relationships within the school and between teachers and students was strongly related to dropping out. Lee and Smith (1999) go on further to note that in addition to the valuable network formed between teachers and students, social support from parents, peers and students' neighborhood were positively related to learning. It should be noted as well, that the importance of high academic expectations and press played a role in this relationship. Students who reported considerable support from teachers, peers, parents and neighborhoods learned more if they also attended schools where they were pushed by a rigorous curriculum and challenged academically.

Resilience

In recent years, researchers have begun studying the notion of resilience, particularly as it relates to high risk youth from urban areas (Murray & Naranjo, 2008; Utsey, Boldem, Lanier & Williams, 2007; Wang & Gordon, 1994). Studying resilience allows for the analysis of factors that lead to positive outcomes within contexts of risk (Murray & Naranjo, 2008). Resilience is defined as "...good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development" (Masten, 2001, p. 228). Masten (1994) notes that

two conditions must be present in identifying resilience. First, there must be the presence of significant threat or exposure to severe adversity. Second, there must be a determination that positive adaptation has occurred in the face of adversity. Threat and adversity are viewed as risk factors, which increased the likelihood of poor outcomes, while protective factors are assets that facilitate positive adaptation in the midst of threat and adversity (Utsey et al., 2007).

Croninger and Lee (2001) found that although demographics, academic ability and other social risk factors are predictive of whether or not one will drop out of school, having a supportive relationship with a teacher significantly decreased the likelihood of dropping out. This effect, they add, is particularly strong among youth who were at the highest risk of dropping out. This indicates that teacher-student relationship is a protective factor that significantly moderates the risk of dropping out.

Gordon (1995) also studied protective factors as they facilitate positive adaptations for African Americans in urban environments. In this study, 138 urban subjects from “impoverished, stressful backgrounds” were examined. Gordon sought to determine the role of self-concept and motivation in aiding resilience. Findings suggest that resilient African American high school students differed from their non-resilient peers in the cognitive domain: cognitive ability, cognitive environmental support, cognitive control, and cognitive importance. They also placed more emphasis on extracurricular activities and material gain.

In another study on resilience, Utsey et al. (2007) sought to determine how culture-specific coping behaviors contribute to resilient outcomes in African Americans from high-risk urban communities. In a study of 385 participants, they found that both

traditional and cultural factors were predictors of resilient outcomes for African Americans. More specifically, traditional factors include cognitive ability, social support, family cohesion and adaptability. Cultural factors were inclusive of cultural beliefs, behaviors and practices unique to the African American population.

Although not framed as an investigation of resilient youth, similar findings have been reported by Connell and his colleagues (1995). They conducted a longitudinal study of 443 urban African American adolescents and examined behavioral, psychological, and contextual predictors of staying in high school. Behavioral factors examined were attendance, suspensions, grades, test scores, and grade retention. Psychological factors examined were students' engagement in school, their self-system processes, and their experience of support from adults at home and in school. Neighborhood composition and family economic resources were included as contextual variables. Results indicated that students who avoided risk behavior in junior high school and reported themselves as more engaged were more likely to remain in high school; engaged students reported more positive perceptions of competence and autonomy in the school setting than less engaged students did; students' reports of support from home and from school were also listed as protective factors.

Finally, research literature on risk and resilience among Black males in urban areas is limited. However, because Black males are at greater risk for adversity and life stress than most other groups, more research is needed to help predict positive outcomes despite exposure to risk and adversity.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Eleven Black men between the ages of 19 and 35 participated in the study. The median age of the participants was 28. All participants graduated from urban high schools in New Jersey. Of the eleven, ten attended and graduated from public urban high schools. One attended and graduated from a private, Catholic high school. Seven of the participants attended schools in Newark, one in East Orange, one in Irvington and two in Trenton. These individuals were recruited through various networking methods.

Measures

Demographics Sheet (See Appendix B). This one-paged sheet requested information on the participants' demographics such as age, relationship status, current occupation, income level and religious affiliation.

Semi-Structured Interview (See Appendix C): This interview was comprised of open-ended questions regarding the individual's experiences, thoughts, and opinions in regards to the messages, teachings and attitudes they obtained from their families, communities, schools, and how these affected their decision to persist in school.

Procedures

Participants were recruited through a networking sample. Participants signed an informed consent form (see Appendix A) that was kept in a separate locked file from any participants' responses in order to maintain confidentiality. Participants then completed a demographics page (see Appendix B) to garner information on their age, relationship status, current occupation, income levels and religious affiliations. Participants were then interviewed through a semi-structured interview (see Appendix C) containing open-ended questions about their experiences, thoughts and opinions in regards to growing up in an urban neighborhood and attending high school in such a neighborhood.

The principal investigator conducted all interviews in environments that were comfortable, private, and convenient for the interviewees. The interview took approximately one and one-half hours. Interviews were audio taped to contribute to the authenticity of the study. Participants were then assigned a case number which was the only identification used on response materials. No identifying information was attached to the transcriptions or audiotapes. The principal investigator transcribed all interviews and tapes were destroyed after transcription. All transcripts of interviews and other data collected from the participants were maintained in confidence by the investigator in a locked file cabinet and destroyed at the end of the study.

Upon conclusion of the interview, participants completed an index card with their contact information in order to be enrolled in a lottery for a gift certificate for \$50. At the end of the study, one index card was drawn at random and the recipient of the gift certificate was contacted.

Data Analysis

Grounded Theory Approach

The data collected were analyzed according to the grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). The principal investigator used the transcriptions of the interviews to complete the data analysis. Audiotapes were reviewed for additional clarification as needed. It was anticipated that the results of this study would offer hypotheses and themes which might later be tested in future qualitative and quantitative studies.

Data analyzed utilizing the grounded theory approach is divided into three distinct, but related, processes of analysis. These three stages are open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding is the process by which data is examined and organized by similarities and differences. In this study, open coding entailed question by question analysis of the transcript as well as analysis of the document as a whole. The objective of open coding was to identify relevant categories and names for smaller groups of data. Categories were then collapsed under more abstract labels as a means of pulling together the groups or subcategories.

The second stage in the process, axial coding, grouped the data together in new combinations by identifying relationships between a category and its subcategories. Like open coding, axial coding continued the process of defining categories. The process of axial coding went further than identifying properties but stopped short of offering theoretical formulations.

Selective coding was the final stage of the qualitative analysis. Previously identified categories were further collapsed under main categories to form the major themes. The themes were explored to establish connections between them. (Strauss & Corbin, 1997).

Case Study Methodology

A case study methodology was also utilized as a means of presenting information gathered in this qualitative study. Yin's (2009) case study method posits that case studies maximize what can be learned about the system being examined. Case studies provides for multi-perspective analysis, allowing researchers to build upon, produce, dispute or challenge a theory; explain a situation; provide a basis to apply solutions to situations; as well as to explore or describe an object or phenomenon. Two interviews were selected and formatted as case studies in order to offer a better understanding of the experiences of these Black men delivered in their own words. The two cases chosen represented the breadth of the experiences among Black men growing up in urban areas and ultimately graduating from urban high schools.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Participants' Demographics

Eleven Black men were interviewed as part of this dissertation study. The first segment of the interview gathered demographic information on the participants, identifying their age, the city they grew up in, their current marital status, occupation and religious affiliation. As noted earlier, this small sample included men whose ages ranged from 19 to 35. The median age of the participants was 28. At the time of the interview, seven of the participants noted that they were single; three were in a relationship, but not married; and one participant was married.

Current occupations varied. Six of the participants worked in what are considered “professional careers.” More specifically, one participant was employed as an elementary school principal, another a psychologist, another was a high school teacher, one participant was employed as a career coordinator for a county college and also worked as a basketball coach, and two participants were directors of not-for-profit youth programs. Of the remaining five participants, three were students enrolled in college, one worked as a custodial worker and one was unemployed. When asked about religious affiliations, four of the participants noted that they were Christian, and seven noted no religious affiliation.

Experiences in Family

Participants were asked a series of questions to garner information on their family background and experiences within their families. Of the eleven respondents, seven stated that while growing up, they lived with a single mother and their siblings. Not one of these participants had consistent, daily or even weekly interactions with their fathers. The nature of these interactions and relationships are reflected in the following responses. One participant, Respondent # 6, stated “I never knew my father. The only father I had was my grandfather.” Respondent #8 noted that his father lived in the south...“he was around until I was five and then he just left...he moved back to New Jersey when I was about 16.” He noted that he saw his father about once per year. He recalled one instance when he saw his father at Christmas. “He was drunk and I remember him saying ‘what you want?’ I didn’t respond, and he just gave me some money and left.” Yet another participant, Respondent #10, noted that his father was involved in his life until he was about six years old. He poignantly spoke of his father in this manner: “the stressors and pressures of being a Black man, a teenage father himself, just got the best of him...once he left, he left and I didn’t see him again.” Of the seven participants who grew up with their single mothers, three noted that at various points in their lives, at least one grandparent lived within the household.

Three of the participants grew up in a home with both biological parents present. Of these three participants, two had siblings. The third participant was an only-child who lived with his parents, an aunt, and an older cousin. Finally, one participant grew up with his mother, stepfather and siblings.

Each interviewee was asked about their parent's education level. Of the interviewees that grew up in single parent households, four noted that their mothers were high school graduates; two shared that their mothers dropped out of school before completing high school and one participant was unsure. Although fathers were not present in the household, two shared that their fathers were high school graduates, three of the participants noted that their fathers did not graduate high school, and two were unsure. Of the three participants who grew up with both biological parents present, one acknowledged that neither parent graduated from high school; the other two interviewees noted that their fathers dropped out of high school, but that their mothers both graduated and had some college education.

Participants were also asked about approximate annual household incomes. Although the large majority of participants explained that they were not sure of their family's income level, all noted that they were from working class households with families that struggled financially. Participants noted that their parents occupations included factory, domestic and postal workers, truck drivers, and cafeteria workers.

When asked about alcohol and drug use within the family, four of the eleven participants noted that there was no alcohol or drug use within their family. One participant noted that although his father did drink occasionally, he did not abuse it and would not consider him an alcoholic. The other six participants (55%) all stated that drug and alcohol use and abuse played a significant role within their families. Respondent #1 noted that his stepfather was an alcoholic. Respondent #2 stated:

My mother never abused it, but she did use it [marijuana]. She smoked weed when she felt like it. And she's what we would refer to as a social drinker, but she never became an alcoholic and wouldn't spend her last to get drunk or high.

My father, however, he's another story. He was a junkie. At that time, he was using heroine like everyone else.

Respondent #8 noted that his brother, who was approximately 16 years his elder, was an alcoholic and that his father was an alcoholic as well. Another participant, Respondent #9 noted that both his maternal grandparents and mother were alcoholics, who also smoked marijuana. Respondent #10 previously noted that his father was an avid drug user, who left the family and never returned. He did not consider his father "family" and when asked about drug use within the family stated:

I was never exposed to it from my mother, but when we talk about the extended family, there was alcoholism and there was some drug abuse as well, but it was never in my immediate household.

Respondent #4 spoke at length of his extensive exposure to drug and alcohol use within the family. He stated "...my father was a heroine addict and still is today. He was an alcoholic, but he had to stop drinking because he had cirrhosis of the liver. And then there is also drug abuse in my extended family: aunts, uncles, cousins and so on and so forth. My father is also a cigarette smoker." When asked what life was like living with a drug addict, he noted:

It was hard, but you see, like I said, I accepted the drug use. So I never looked at it as a flaw in my father. Now as an adult, I look back and I say that we could have been so much further in life, but when I was younger, I didn't look at it as a flaw of his. I looked at it as his daily cup of coffee... It didn't take away from how I looked at him. He was still my father.

Participants were asked about the degree to which family participated in their school life. The large majority (73%) noted that members of their family were very active participants in their school life. They all noted that their mothers, more than other family members, played an active role in their school life. One participant, Respondent #2, spoke of his mother's role in his school life as such: "She *was* my school life. If I

didn't bring home A's and B's, I'd have my tail whipped." Another participant,

Respondent #10, noted that:

She was always involved, particularly in the early years, my elementary school years. I guess those are more critical than high school years, since they laid the foundation to guide me the rest of the way. My mom was very involved. She was at the school every single day, almost the entire day. She was there from the time we went to school until the time we got off.

Although eight of the eleven (73%) participants noted that family played a significant role in their lives, two of the eight stated that their mother might have participated even more if she did not work as much.

Only two of the eleven participants noted that religion played an important role in their family's life as they were growing up. Respondent #11, asserted that religion

...played an important role. She [mother] made us go to church and after a while, I just started to get into it. We went to church every Sunday, every Wednesday and every Thursday...for as long as I can remember until I turned 21.

Another participant, Respondent #8, noted that his mother was very active in church and so were his brothers who are now ministers and deacons. He did, however, note that although he was "always around prayer and religion," once he started to play baseball and other sports, he stopped attending church regularly to attend Sunday games. Four participants definitively noted that religion did not play an important role in their or their family's life. The other five participants noted that religion was not paramount growing up and although they were somewhat involved with church and religion, it was limited. The common thread amongst these participants is that religion was not a consistent part of their lives. Respondent #5 noted "my grandfather was a preacher, so early on, I had to go to church. But as I got older, I strayed away from church." Another participant, Respondent #7, noted that "we went to church sometimes. We started off going to

church and then we stopped going regularly. Then we just stopped all together by the time I was nine.”

When asked about supports within the family, 100% of the participants noted that they had considerable support within the family. Eight of the eleven participants noted that their greatest source of support was from their mothers. Two participants noted that their primary source of support within the family was from a sibling and one participant noted that his primary source of support was from his uncles.

Experiences in the Community

The second part of the interview sought information on the communities the participants’ grew up in, their participation in community activities and the degree of support they had from the community.

When asked what it was like living in their respective communities, 73% of participants revealed that their overall experience was positive. In fact, they noted responses inclusive of terms like “it was fun” or “I loved it.” Respondent #10 noted:

I liken my experience to the movie *Crooklyn*, where it was a true community. We were out playing tag, racing from telephone pole to telephone pole, playing all types of sports, so it felt like every family on our block comprised one family. So it was a very nice place to live. And of course I’m just speaking about my community...to me that was where everything happened.

The remaining three participants, 27%, noted that it was “tough” or “hard” growing up in their neighborhoods. Although participants differed in their neighborhood experiences and how they perceived these experiences, 100% of the participants noted that they grew up in neighborhoods where the racial/cultural makeup was predominantly Black. One respondent shared “it was all Black. The only time we saw anything else was the Puerto

Ricans who owned the corner stores.” When asked about the racial makeup of the elementary schools they attended, all noted that the students in the schools were predominantly Black as well. However, when asked about faculty, all participants noted the faculty was predominantly White.

To get an idea of the perceived importance of education within the community, participants were asked about the messages they heard about education as they were growing up. All, but one participant noted that they heard messages about the importance of education. Several participants shared that these messages were also heard from those in the neighborhood that weren’t necessarily on the “right path” themselves. Respondent #2 recalled

I had older people who were hustling, who were selling drugs and doing all the wrong things themselves, telling me that they didn’t want to see me doing the same. I remember those guys not letting me get into the hustling game and not letting me fall off my academic game.... They were like surrogate brothers, trying to get me to stay on the right path.

The participant that noted that he did not hear any messages from the community regarding education shared: “I didn’t hear a lot. If I didn’t have my mother to set the foundation in elementary school...if she didn’t play that role, there really weren’t many alternatives for me.”

In addition to garnering information on the messages participants were hearing about education, it was also important to understand the extent to which extracurricular and extramural services were available within the community. Furthermore, it was important to gain insight on the utilization of these services by study participants. The large majority of participants in this study, sixty four percent, stated that they participated in at least one community based activity. Of the four remaining participants, two noted

that although they did not participate in community based events and activities, they did spend much of their time playing sports with family members or friends who lived on their blocks. Consequently, only two of the eleven participants noted that they did not participate in any activities.

Participants were asked about the nature of supports that were available within their community. Eight of the eleven asserted that they had supports and were able to identify and discuss these supports. These community supports ranged from same- age friends to coaches at recreational centers. One participant, Respondent #8, shared the following sentiments: “Coach W, my little league coach, was really supportive. He’d come pick us up for practice, he’d take us out to eat. That was a big deal when you are a kid.”

Experiences in School

The third portion of the interview focused specifically on the participants’ experiences within the school setting. All participants attended and graduated from high schools in urban districts in New Jersey. Six of the eleven participants graduated at seventeen years old, while the remaining participants graduated at eighteen. Seven of the eleven participants attended one high school and graduated from that one high school, without transferring or being expelled. Four participants attended at least two high schools prior to graduating. It should be noted that none of the participants had voluntarily dropped out or stopped out of high school; instead, they gave reasons for attending more than one high school that included the following rationales: “I waited too long to apply to other schools, so I had to go to a technical school for a year. Then I went to Science High School [a magnet school for academically gifted students] my

sophomore year.” Another respondent offered “...we moved a lot, every year we moved. I went to three different high schools: one for ninth grade, one for tenth grade and another for eleventh and twelfth grade.”

Participants were asked about their attendance in school. A large majority of participants, 82%, noted that they had excellent attendance in school. In fact, most noted that they had perfect attendance. Respondent #7 noted, “I rarely missed a day. I went to school even when I was sick.” Another participant, Respondent #1 shared: “I couldn’t miss a day. My parents wouldn’t let me, and to be honest, I really enjoyed going.” Still another participant offered the following response:

Everyday. I was in school every single day. I never missed a day of school and I tell this story to my children When I was in the 4th grade, my mother took us on vacation. We were leaving the last day of school, before spring break, and I had perfect attendance. I convinced my mother to leave later that same day so I could go to school and maintain my attendance. I mean, it was a big deal. I don’t know if it was that I enjoyed school so much, or just that I wanted to get the award at the end of the year, but it was a big deal. So, by the time I got to high school, getting up and going to school wasn’t a problem. Staying home just to stay home was not an option.

One of the two participants who did not have good school attendance noted that he had to work. He explained that he worked during the day at times, and as such would miss school. The second participant explained that even though on the school record he had good attendance, he did not always attend class. He shared: “if you’re talking about coming to school and going to homeroom, I was there. I’d come to the building to get attendance taken and then I was out of the building.”

Although six of the eleven participants noted that they earned just average grades in school (C’s), one hundred percent noted that failure was not an option. In fact, one participant recalled the only time he received a grade of ‘F.’

I got a 'F' in Spanish my sophomore year at Science High. It was the first cycle and I got it because I cussed the teacher. He blamed me for cheating and a young lady was actually cheating off my paper. I asked him to just let me take the test again and he said no. So I said, "that's bull" and he said "I'm going to fail you" and he did. I proceeded for the next five cycles to get straight A's and he felt bad that he had no choice but to give me a B for the year.

Although no specific question was asked regarding peers and academic excellence, many participants who did well academically noted that they had to "prove" themselves to schoolmates and classmates. One respondent spoke candidly about his experience in a Gifted and Talented program. He explained:

Gifted and Talented was a funny experience. We were definitely challenged in the classroom and it made the elementary and middle school experience, in particular, different in that we were separated from the general population...so we didn't even eat lunch with our grade level, ever. Because of this, there was always a feeling from the kids that were not in G&T, that those people think they are better, they think they are smarter. It created an 'us against them' type of thing. Some people who were in the program always felt as if they had to prove that they belonged.

Another respondent explained that he had always been a "top student." He noted that for his entire school career, he was an "A" or "B" student. He too encountered some challenges trying to navigate between being academically adept and being accepted among age mates. He admitted that he did not always navigate through these challenges appropriately or effectively. As a result, he was disciplined at school several times.

When asked to explain, he stated:

I got talked to more than a few times. But you know I was from the hood and I had to make sure that they knew I wasn't a punk. I was smart, but I wasn't White, I wasn't soft and I was no punk. I had my share of going to the administrative offices.

When asked what they liked most about school, responses varied significantly. All respondents of their own accord, named at least two things they liked most about school.

Although the responses varied, they all related somehow to the school staff or school environment. One participant, Respondent #1 noted:

The teachers. I think back then, you saw that more teachers cared for the children and the kids' education than today. Today, it seems like for many teachers, it is just a job. I volunteer and work within the system, and I see the teachers at 3:05, they are already pulling out the parking lot before the kids are even crossing the street. When I was growing up, it was different. Teachers would stay until 4:00 and give you detention and that would be "lets go over some of the things you didn't get in class" so it made you pay attention in class, because you didn't want to be in detention till 4:00. Today, detention is punitive. You just sit there and be quiet, and that's not the way we need to be when you have a failing school district.

Another respondent shared that he liked the school environment most. He shared "everyone knew each other...there was a lot of communication." Another participant noted that his school experience was great on several fronts and that he was not able to name just one component that he liked best:

It was great. Great on several fronts. One because I was an athlete and excelled in athletics, so that added a whole other set of dynamics. Whatever you are going through, if you are involved in something and you excel at it, it definitely adds to the experience. And then I was an above average student, wouldn't say I was an excellent student but definitely above average. So the high school experience was great, even though the stigma of Trenton High School has always been that the kids don't learn and that its not the best place to send your children, I credit some of the lessons I have learned while a student at Trenton High ...not just in the classroom, for helping me to succeed in college and in life.

Responding to the question of what they liked least about school proved to be more difficult for the participants. In fact, six of the eleven participants were unable to name what they liked least about school. Of the participants that did name their least favorite aspect, one noted that he did not like the long school days and another stated that discipline was taken too seriously. Yet another participant shared: "I liked least the fact that it appeared that the teachers didn't really care. There was just the spirit that the teachers didn't care whether the kids learned or not and that spirit was all throughout the

school.” As aforementioned, one participant, Respondent #7, attended Catholic schools in his urban neighborhood. He noted that having to wear uniforms is what he liked least about school. He explained that he did not have a problem with the uniform in particular, but the fact that it further ostracized him from his neighborhood friends and public school counterparts. Respondent #7 shared:

Uniforms. It was painful. Just waiting at the bus stop and I had to take four busses just to get back home...seeing all your friends in regular clothes, while I'm standing at the bus stop with a dress shirt and a tie on. They were probably thinking 'he thinks he's better than us because he's going to Catholic School'... but I was just like them, I just went to another school.

There was far less discrepancy when participants were asked about administrators, faculty or staff who they found to be particularly supportive. In fact, one hundred percent of participants were able to affirmatively name at least one school staff or faculty member who they felt was supportive. Ten of the eleven participants named at least one teacher. The sole participant that did not name a teacher named his high school principal. Respondent #4 noted that “I had some supportive teachers, especially Mr. O’Neil. The first day of class, he gave students his phone number so they could call if they were having any problems with homework. He wanted us to do well.” Respondent #9 named an high school English teacher who he found to be supportive. He added:

He was supportive in that he wouldn't let me settle for C's. That was the class that I got B+'s and A's because I would give him C work and he just wouldn't accept it, he would just give it back to me. He saw the potential in me and although I was willing to just accept the C, he must've thought that I would go through life continually accepting C's...I saw then that he cared.

Likewise, another respondent spoke to the importance of having supportive teachers who set high expectations. He stated:

...there were teachers who noticed something early, and pushed me to not accept C's. I had a teacher once, in third grade, and I was getting C's on my report cards

and she had a conversation with me and said “you know its good that you’re not failing, but C’s are mediocre and do you want to be a mediocre person?” And that’s a conversation that sticks with me to this day. When she used mediocre, not average, but mediocre. Mediocre has a ring to it, and a negative one, one that I did not want to be.

Other interviewees noted that teachers were supportive outside of the classroom environment as well. These teachers attended their extracurricular games and activities, and would make themselves available to talk when necessary. One respondent shared this about one of his teachers: “...she helped us with our homework, in any subject, any question we had, if we had anything we needed to talk about, we could talk to her.”

Some participants were quite reflective and insightful, noting that had they not excelled academically or in sports, they would not have gotten support to the extent they did. More specifically, Respondent #10 notes the following:

Because I was in this accelerated program, I think all the teachers had an expectation of the kids in this program that they didn’t have about the other kids. So I don’t remember a bad experience that I had with any of my teachers, It seems to me that they thought ‘because I know you have a high probability of going to college, I’m going to invest a little more in you than I would the guy that’s sitting on the fence a little, the one that could go left or right.’ For me, I think it makes more sense to spend the resources or extend more resources to the child that’s sitting on the fence.

Another participant, Respondent #2 added “My teachers were pretty good. They pushed pretty hard, but that’s because I went to pretty good schools. Had I not been in those magnet and selective schools, those supports might not have been there.” Yet another respondent acknowledged that the entire Physical Education Department supported him: “Everyone was just so nice. They taught me a lot about life. I guess they started liking me when they actually saw me playing basketball. They saw something in me and took time out for me.”

Participants were also asked if they were ever suspended, expelled or disciplined at school. Nine of the eleven participants acknowledged being suspended from school at least once. Seven of the nine noted that they were suspended for fighting. This was not limited to physical or fist fights; participants were also suspended for food fights and verbal arguments. Another participant was suspended because he brought a switchblade to school. He spoke at length of his suspension:

I walked into school with a switchblade, by accident...I worked for Minute Maid and I walked into school with my work coat. I didn't realize my workcoat still had a switchblade in it. So they made a big thing about it, I got locked up and had to go to court and they were talking about putting me in Montgomery [alternate high school]. I'm still pissed at Newark Public Schools for doing that, because they took away a large portion of my senior year.

Ten of the eleven participants noted that they participated in extracurricular activities within the school setting. When asked specifically about participation in extracurricular activities while in high school, nine of the eleven participants noted participation. Although the large majority, eight of the nine participants, were active in sports, respondents also participated in other activities including, the school band, student government and the drama club.

Experiences with peers/friends

The following section of the interview sought to garner information on the participants' experiences with their peers and friends. Participants were asked to discuss how they functioned socially. Ten of the eleven participants noted that they had very good friends in school. Even with this seemingly homogeneous set of answers, there was considerable variation in the degree to which they functioned socially. One participant

referred to himself as a “social-light,” noting that he had an abundance of friends and was quite popular in school. Another participant, Respondent #1, shared

Socially, I was a bit of a nerd. I definitely hung around the nerdy crew and academically, we did very well. My sister was nothing like that, she had more friends and didn't do as well academically...Looking back, many would've probably said I was shy. I might even say I was pretty shy. I was pretty reserved, I would be quiet and just observe things around me.

Despite variation in the extent of their social functioning, one hundred percent of the participants in this small sample noted that they had friends and/or same aged family members that they were close to while going through school. No one noted feelings of isolation. Furthermore, a number of participants noted that they had a core group of friends with whom they consistently remained friends. One participant noted “I had a set of friends...there were four of us. We have been friends since kindergarten...in fact, we are friends even now.” Another participant shared similar sentiments, noting “I had a good core group of friends and we all played sports together...we have been friends since the first grade.”

Participants were also asked, who, if anyone, they were closest to while attending school. Seven of the eleven participants noted that they had a best friend who they remained close to throughout their school career. The other four participants noted that they had friends, who at different points or stages of their lives, they felt closest to. One participant explained:

I always had someone I was closest to at that time...at each phase, there was a different friend or set of friends. In elementary school, there was one group. In junior high, there were two friends I was close to. By the time I got to high school, those friends from junior high and elementary were no longer really friends. Then when I went to college, it was an entirely new set of friends.

Although all respondents noted that at different stages in their lives, they had friends they were closest to, only two respondents credited friends for helping them to get through experiences that were difficult for them. Another two noted that family members, namely grandmothers and mothers, helped them to get through their most difficult experiences. Interestingly, the majority of participants (7 out of 11) percent credited themselves as their primary source of support for getting through difficult situations. When asked, who has helped you get through those experiences that were difficult for you, Respondent #8 noted “nobody really...I kept a lot to myself...I didn’t want to burden other people. People have their own problems, me bringing mine to them isn’t going to be a help.” Respondent #4 shared “at the end of the day, there really weren’t too many people that you could talk to that could actually help you. You just had to work it out on your own.”

Participants were also asked about their role models. The large majority, ten of the eleven participants, noted that they did have role models as they were growing up. Of the ten, seven named family members as their role models. The other three named celebrity basketball players or musicians who they looked up to. Answers to a follow up question regarding qualities of the identified role models that they have tried to incorporate into their adult life yielded tremendous disparity in responses. One participant, Respondent #11, who identified his mother as a role model, noted that he has tried to incorporate her strength into his adult life. He shared “...watching my mother struggle...that’s where I got strength. It taught me to be a better father. Living with a mother, you had to learn how to be a man by yourself. You learn that you have to be strong for your family.” Another respondent noted that he incorporated his uncle’s

work ethics into his adult life. “My uncle always had a job. As I got older, I always had a job. Anyone that knows me would tell you that. I was fourteen when I had my first job.”

The final two questions regarding school mates and peers sought to gather responses on the perceived number of classmates/schoolmates that went on to graduate from high school. One participant perceived that approximately 20% of classmates that entered high school with him graduated. He went on to add “I’m not even sure if 20% graduated...but if 20% of them graduated, I’d say half of them are doing bad now.” Several participants explained that almost all of their classmates graduated from high school. These participants, however, were quite astute in adding that this wasn’t the case for others in the neighborhood that did not attend these selective magnet or specialized high schools. One participant, Respondent #4, shared “From Science High, they all graduated. From my community, ha!... I know more people my age from my community who are locked up or have been locked up than graduated from high school.”

Another participant spoke to the fact that many students do graduate at some point, but not necessarily on time or with their age mates. Respondent # 6 added

I’d say eventually, many of them did graduate. But a lot of people that came in freshman year with me did not graduate when I graduated. A lot did drop out while we were in school, but some didn’t have the credits or were held back and probably graduated later.

Participants were then asked if many of their classmates went on to college. The answers to this follow up question yielded largely negative responses. In fact, all respondents noted that of their classmates that did graduate, the majority did not go to college. Respondent #1 remarked “No, most of them started working.” Similarly, Respondent #5 added “No, a lot started to work. Some said they’d take a year break and

go back to school and just never made it back.” As aforementioned, some participants noted that because they attended specialized and selective high schools, the graduation outcomes of their schoolmates might not be necessarily representative of their neighborhood peers that attended zoned or district high schools. One such respondent added

The difference between Science [a magnet/specialized school] and Central [a district/zoned school] is that people at Science High came from all over Newark and their Science High education allowed them to go to many different colleges, and very good colleges, like Georgetown and Yale. The kids from Central were all from my neighborhood and they had much less options.

Another respondent who attended the only high school in his city was a part of a highly selective Gifted and Talented Program. He speaks of college attendance in this manner: “Of the ones that did graduate high school, most did not go on to college. But most of the people I took classes with went to college.”

Current Experiences

A few questions were asked to gain further insight on the outcomes and current experiences of interview participants. First, participants were asked about their current occupations. Seven of the participants were currently employed, three were enrolled in college and one was unemployed, but working as a parent volunteer at his child’s school. Interestingly enough, most of the participants noted that they chose to work in the careers or areas they do as a direct result of their experiences growing up. A number of participants noted the importance of giving back to the community and to the neighborhood they are from. One participant, who is currently employed as a school psychologist added,

I chose to work here, because it's my home. It's my home and these are my children. I hope that I don't seem outdated to them. I hope that they know I'm coming from the same social class as them. I want them to know that they can make it out...I don't know how well I come across to the kids, because we are older, but I am here because I feel like I know these kids. They are no different than I was or my friends were: I know them.

Another participant who coaches basketball shared:

My life revolves around basketball and academics...that's pretty much it in a nutshell. I definitely try to give back what was given to me to change my life. I want to give those same opportunities to a child I know has the same potential that I had. I want to force his hand, to the point where he realizes that he cannot accept being average...because being average means an average life, an average paycheck, we don't want to settle for average.

Another respondent who works for the State of New Jersey in a field he believes is "far removed from the community," offers of his time to volunteer because he feels a need to give back. He remarked:

I volunteered with a national program for seven years before realizing that I needed to work for my own community. I created a not-for-profit organization myself, Building Our Youth Development. Within it is a character education program, it has life skills, job education...it's all encompassing. We just added a parent academy, because we realized how much we need to reach and empower our parents if we are to reach our kids.

It is interesting to note that although all the participants recognized the importance of giving back to their community, most of them would prefer to live outside of the urban areas in which they were raised. Four of the eleven participants currently live in a suburban area near the cities in which they were raised. An additional four note that although they presently live in the urban cities they grew up in, they plan to move to a suburban area within the next five to ten years. One participant stated:

I'll probably live in the suburbs, but come in to Newark to work still. My work is here. I have really big goals and I want to run for mayor at some point. I see myself living outside of here [Newark], but I can work here for the rest of my life.

Only three of the eleven participants interviewed noted that they would like to remain in their cities of origin. When asked why he chooses to remain in an urban setting, one participant, Respondent # 9, remarked

...because I feel that my roots are in an urban area. I stay connected to the children that are growing up here. That's one of the problems with so many teachers. There is no connection; they don't relate to our students. The connection is lost.

When asked about the single most important factor that influenced their decisions to stay in school, five of the eleven participants offered responses related to family.

Respondent # 5 noted, "no one in my family has a college degree. I knew that in order for me to get that, I had to finish high school." Another participant added "To be honest, I really didn't like school. I never did, but I wanted to prove to my mother that I could do it...that I could be the first person in my family to graduate because my brothers and uncles all dropped out." Other participants noted that the single most important factor influencing their decision to stay in school had to do with their own sense of self determination and personal desires to have and to excel. Respondent #8 added, "I just knew I couldn't get the things I wanted without an education." Another participant, Respondent #1 shared the defining moment that kept him in school:

There was a junior achievement program and this guy came in with a scale, and said, "If you don't have a college education, you'll never be able to own a BMW, own your own home, etc." I sat there in 11th grade and I already knew that I didn't want to go to college, but wanted those things. There aren't too many people doing that today. They are not helping kids to connect the ability to make a good life for oneself to having an education. I wanted to do well for myself and that day, I decided that if I ever wanted to do well, I needed an education.

Participants were asked how being a Black man from an urban area has affected their life and decisions. All participants noted at least one positive corollary. For example, Respondent #5 remarked:

“It’s made me stronger, but it’s also made me realize that some struggles aren’t necessary. A child shouldn’t have to go through some of the things they do just because they grow up in an area like Newark. That’s why I don’t want to be here for the rest of my life; that’s why I want to get out.”

Respondent #9 also affirmed

I am stronger because of where I grew up. Being deprived of a lot of resources pretty much determined how I approach life. You take for instance the suburban area that has the resources for instance if they are taking the SAT. Their kids are more prepared than the child in the urban area. But this lack of resources also helped to build character. I think a lot of Black males in urban areas get that...they start to realize that nothing will be given to you. You have to work hard to get what you have, so when you do become successful, it’s because of your drive and no one can take that away.

Recommendations and Suggestions

The final section of the interview was structured in such a manner as to allow participants to make recommendations and suggestions, which might inform services offered to Black males and increase their likelihood of high school retention.

First, participants were asked: “what are your recommendations for helping young Black males in urban areas to remain focused and stay in school?” Responses to this question appeared to fall into three main categories: importance of setting goals; importance of participating in extracurricular and community activities; and the importance of being exposed to new and different environments and activities. One participant noted that young Black men should “...never stop learning and make sure you have a vision. Don’t let anyone, not even self or parents deter you from your goals.”

Another participant emphasized the importance of participating in structured recreational activities. He commented “take up an activity. It will really keep you out of a lot of trouble and really isolate you from the streets. And that’s what you need. You need to stay out of the streets.”

Another participant recognized the importance of setting long term goals, like providing for a family. This respondent noted that we must,

Emphasize the importance of being a provider. In our community, Black women have become the providers. If we emphasize the importance to our young men of being providers, that will keep a lot of kids motivated and in turn will stay in school. I’d tell them to put forth effort and to set a goal. A lot of our kids don’t even understand what goals are. We need to teach them about setting goals and show them how to achieve these goals and assist them by putting them on the right track.

Another participant emphasized the importance of being

...exposed to things that they are not accustomed to seeing. Sometimes we get trapped and believe that our world is as big as the section of the city we are growing up in. Just exposure to plays, cultural events, teaching young men how to tie a tie and young women how to properly clothe themselves. Just exposure. Second, particularly for young men, we have to become comfortable speaking about who we are. At the high school, we have School Based Youth Services, with two mental health clinicians and I try to force them to go see these clinicians, because you can’t keep walking around with these things bottled up. We have to create an environment, where they feel comfortable sharing their experiences with someone else. Help them to understand that it doesn’t mean they are crazy for talking to a clinician, but understanding that your mental health is extremely, extremely, extremely important. We bottle so much up because we think we are being tough or being manly, so we walk around with it pent up inside of us. And in many cases, a lot of Black men are walking time bombs and we explode.

When respondents were asked to make recommendations to help educators, administrators and policy makers work better with Black males to increase their likelihood of success, responses were almost identical. All eleven participants, in one way or another, emphasized the importance of teachers and administrators making real

and genuine connections with Black male students. One participant noted that a major problem with our schools today is that:

...teachers don't speak their language. Many teachers are just not sincere and kids pick up on this...children don't understand that it's not about the teacher, its about them and what they need to get out of that teacher. So they end up putting this wall up and become detached from the teacher and from school in general. In many cases, the whole structure is saying you can't do, you are not going to be able to do...instead of looking at what they can do and pushing kids to that level. They need to engage kids in conversations, listen to their music, learn their language and relate to our kids.

Another participant added:

Inner city educators, especially males, they need to step their game up. We need to look at these young men as our children and we have to be hard on them. But in being hard on them, we have to show them love. Our kids crave that. We have to set high expectations and teach these young men how to be men. How to be wise men, making wise decisions, not how to be tough and dominant alpha males. And last, our teachers need to show love. This is all about love. So many of our kids are the way they are because they are not loved. Those kids that are doing well in school are usually those kids that feel like their teachers like them or love them. This is not rocket science.

It was quite interesting that three of the eleven participants likened the school system to a business. One respondent notes the following:

Education to me is like good real estate. Good real estate is about location; Education is about relationships. You cannot allow these young men to think that you feel like you are on some pedestal and that you are better than them. You have to relate. If that means you have to learn some gang lingo to understand what they are talking about, or you have to learn some things from the hood to understand what they are talking about, or you have to take a ride to someone's house to understand what they are talking about, that's what you have to do. You have to, because someone did it for you. And it wasn't necessarily a teacher for you and me, but it was someone.

Another respondent gave this analogy:

My training is from a corporate sense, and I look at everything in that light. If you are sales person and you're trying to increase sales, you are going to have to look at the demographics of those you are trying to sell to. You are going to know this like the back of your hand. You are going to know your product...your target audience... you are going to know who it is and what their quirks are...that

way when you roll out of this product, you'll achieve maximum return. So when we talk about administrators and teachers and various staff, they have to know the demographics that they are dealing with, particularly in urban settings. There are not many teachers who truly understand the experiences of these kids, they don't know that when our kids go home, they go home to truly, truly dysfunctional situations. The kid might not have eaten at home in 3 or 4 days, may not have slept last night. There's a reason that child might be acting up in your classroom.....Understand who you are working with and what their issues are. And that's from top to bottom. School is a big business now. If Nike isn't pumping half a million dollars into a product they are not going to get a big return on, its ridiculous to think that taxpayers should continue to pump the type of money they do into public schools if they are not seeing any type of return.

The importance of parent's and family's role has been a recurring theme throughout this interview. When participants were asked to make recommendations to Black parents and family members for helping their son's stay in school, responses were largely the same. One hundred percent of the participants emphasized the importance of staying connected and involved in the lives of these young Black men. Respondent #1 shared:

...get connected and stay connected. Parents need to understand that kids are never too old to be walked to school. The way you walked them to school and showed them that you were proud in kindergarten and first grade, is the way you need to do it in the 12th grade...and be able to say we did this together.

Respondent #10 echoed much of Respondent #1's suggestions, but added that parents must be willing to seek out resources for their child's benefit and always extending love to your child. He remarks:

Be involved. Because your son turned 13, does not mean your son is a man. Because your son is in high school does not mean your son is a man. If you did not lay the foundation from the beginning, that kid needs you more than ever when he's in high school. And show them you care and don't be afraid to admit that you just don't know...but be able to find out where the resources are, so the child and you can get the resources that you need. And never, ever allow your child, particularly your male child, to feel unloved. How do you do that? I don't know. You know I can only base the things I say on my own experience. My mother didn't tell me she loved me until I was 27 years old, but I knew it. I knew

because I was able to see the sacrifices she made. I knew because she was involved. My mother worked nights from 11-7 and my brother and I were still involved in so many different athletic events, and she would get us to practice everyday.... She did all these things, a lot of times, without sleep, and so she didn't have to tell me she loved me. If that wasn't love, I don't know what love is. So just make sure your child feels loved and not be afraid to express that.

Respondent #8 recognized the necessity of showing Black males that they are loved, and added the importance of being supportive of their children. He shared the following sentiment: "Just be supportive...provide academic support and for those that do extracurricular activities, go to their games, go to their activities. At the end of the day, our kids are looking for love. If you are giving it to them, then they don't have to go searching in the street for it."

Respondent #4 added the importance of parents setting high expectations. He remarked:

My recommendation to parents would be set high expectations for your children. Human beings are able to adapt to most circumstances, even the most adverse situations. Giving your child and setting high expectations, your child will meet it. If you don't allow them to fail, they'll get it...you show me a child doing well in school, I'll show you a child who somewhere in their life has someone setting high expectations.

He also spoke to the importance of having both parents available in the lives of young Black men.

I recommend having both parents. Families, whether that is husband and wife, boyfriend and girlfriend, whatever, families need to stay together and try to work it out for the benefit of the child. I thought about that earlier when I said that I didn't have any female role models...but how different is that for a Black man that grows up with a single mother. I'm not saying she can't teach him to be a young man, but what about that need for a male role model. I had my father, and although he had his problems, he was a hard working man. He taught me that I had to work and he also taught me that when you are with a woman, you have to work out your problems. And I value marriage like that, no matter what the differences are. I think a child needs to be raised by at least two people if not more. We definitely need to get our community back to being a community. I don't know what life has been drained out of the Black community, or the urban

inner city community, but it still takes a village to raise a child...and we can't forget that.

The final interview question was all-encompassing. It did not seek to garner recommendations for a particular person or group, rather, it sought to garner general recommendations. When asked "what do you think could be done to make it easier to increase the retention rate of Black men in high school," responses varied. Despite variations in responses, all but one respondent geared recommendations towards parents and community members. This respondent made an indirect recommendation to policy makers. He spoke passionately of the emphasis that is placed on standardized testing and not our children.

I think standardized testing is putting so much pressure on teachers that they are focused on the test and not on the students. Maybe if they didn't have to focus on that...because the teacher is trying to keep their jobs, that's how they make their money so...they don't waste time on the ones that are hard to reach. If the focus was on the kids and not on the test, they'd have more time to actually reach out to the hard to reach kids, the ones that are on the fence.

Another respondent focused on the importance of the community's value on education.

He remarked,

The community needs to glorify education in every sense...it's everything: mannerisms, opening doors, walking the elderly across the street, speaking properly. We need to hold our kids to these expectations. Our kids aren't held to any expectations now-a-days. Even finishing high school, that isn't even an expectation. But we do expect them to go to jail, we expect them to do something foul to mess up their lives, we expect all the negative things. Has anyone in the community looked at a child, and tell them, you are going to be a lawyer one day? You know, two days ago I told a child, he was acting up in class and I pulled him out and told him, 'you embarrassed me.' And do you know what this child did? He started to cry and cried for at least ten minutes, because I told him 'you embarrassed me'...he never before had any expectations. I expected him to do well and now he knows someone expects him to act a certain way...I think we do value education and we do want our kids to do well, but we have no expectations. A true coach, a true role model, a true teacher sets expectations for our kids and once that expectation is met, we set new ones.

Two respondents noted that in order to increase the retention and subsequent graduation rate of Black men in urban high schools, we must provide them with accessible role models. Respondent # 5 believes that "...they need people to look up to. They need to know that they can work on Wall Street and be successful. Kids here need to know that that's a reality because they don't see it much." Respondent #9 expressed his thoughts in this way:

To be exposed to Black male role models that they have access to. It's different to see them on TV, but when they see people doing things in their community, that's making a good living....you see, a lot of people make money and become successful and move out, so kids don't see those successful people until they come to school for career day and then leave. If they could look around the corner and see Mr. Jones, who is a successful lawyer for instance, they'll realize that they can be like Mr. Jones because he's from where they are from and went to the same school they went to: they need that connection.

CHAPTER V

CASE STUDIES

In this chapter, two case studies will be presented using guidelines set forth by Yin (2009). These two cases, a Black male who grew up in Trenton, and another from Newark, illustrate the diverse, yet strikingly similar experiences of Black men in urban environments. All names have been changed to protect the confidentiality of the interviewees and their families.

Case 1

Terrence

Terrence agreed to meet the interviewer at a book store close to his home. As he walked into the bookstore, he presented as a tall, dark and striking gentleman. He walked with an air of confidence and appeared to demand the attention of the shoppers in the bookstore. This was notable as he was dressed casually, in a t-shirt from his alma-mater and a modest pair of jeans. Despite his inconspicuous attire, he walked with an air of authority. He greeted the interviewer with a firm, but unassuming handshake and was ready to begin the interview.

Terrence is a thirty three year old African American man. He is currently employed as the director of a school-based program and lives in New Jersey with his wife

and children. Christianity is practiced within the home and Terrence notes that he and his family attend church regularly.

Terrence was born and raised in an inner city in New Jersey. He is the middle child of three siblings. He noted that he, his older sister, and younger brother all have the same father. Terrence shared that from the time he was six years old, his father left and was no longer involved in his life. He describes the experience in this manner:

He was involved at an early age, until I was about six...Once my father left, he left. It's not as if my mother and father were ever married or living together. And I don't want to critique him or come down too hard on him because he was a teenage father, but once he was gone, he was gone. And it wasn't like trying to get back in or seeing him occasionally, that was just it.

Terrence's mother is a high school graduate, who worked as a postal worker.

Although he was unsure of her approximate income level, he noted that "...she did make it so that we lived relatively comfortably...whatever the standards of comfortableness were at the time. We didn't want for much."

He describes his home life as typical in many ways, but added that it was atypical in many others.

It was typical...in a sense that I grew up with a single teenage mother, who worked and supported her children. Typical in a sense that there were struggles and we encountered struggles that every other family encountered. Atypical in that, my mother, while she worked nights was constantly involved in everything that we did as children; particularly as it related to our schooling. Some people thought my mom actually worked at the school, because she was at the school so much.

When asked about the degree of connection with his extended family, Terrence noted

My entire family is very close. Again, because we all, at one point lived in the traditional Black household, where everybody lived together. There was a point growing up, before my mom moved out on her own, where we lived with six of her sisters and their children and my grandmother and grandfather all in the same house. So we all grew up very close.

When Terrence was in the second grade, his mother moved with him and his siblings to their own apartment. He lightheartedly shared "...we moved around the corner. It wasn't as if we even moved across town. We moved around the corner to a two bedroom apartment." As such, he remained very close to his extended family.

When asked about alcohol and drug use within the family, Terrence noted that although he was never exposed to drugs or alcohol from his mother, there was considerable drug use and alcoholism within the extended family. He notes that because he is aware of the levels of alcoholism within his family, he, as an adult, does not drink. Interestingly, when asked about drug use within the family, Terrence spoke at length about his extended family. He did not, however, mention his father's drug use until the interviewer asked specifically about his father. Terrence did not appear to consider his father "family," but spoke of his father's drug use in this way:

There is some animosity built up about my Dad, but I look at it on the other side and say he was a young Black man who didn't understand and was dealing with so many pressures of the world. My father actually turned to drugs and in a lot of ways, I'm thankful that when he did fall into that trap, he didn't drag my mother into it. He had sense enough to stay away and not subject my mother to the constant relapse or to expose any of us to his nonsense. I don't know if that was a rational decision that he made, but whatever it is, I'm thankful that my mom didn't have to go through the experience of being with a man who abused drugs.

The interviewer followed up by asking Terrence if he was thankful that he did not have to grow up with a father that abused drugs. He responded,

That's a deep question, because I'm never thankful that I had to grow up without a Dad, because you're learning how to be a man from a woman who doesn't know what its like to be a man. I am thankful though that even though I knew he abused drugs, I was never exposed to it. I didn't have to see him in that state, so I am thankful about that.

Terrence was asked several questions to garner responses related to his family's involvement in his school life. He noted,

When you say family, I am just talking particularly about my mom. She was always involved. Particularly in the early years, my elementary school years. I guess those are more critical than when it came to high school, because those years laid the foundation to guide me the rest of the way. My mom was very involved. She was at the school every single day almost the entire day. She was there from the time we went to school till the time we got off.

Terrence valued this active involvement. In fact, when asked "who or what would you say was most important in helping you succeed in school," he responded,

I think definitely having my mother involved. I think that was the most important. Understanding how she felt about education and how she wanted us to approach our own individual education process and experiences.

He went on to note that in addition to his mother, his male cousins were very supportive

...in terms of encouraging not only me, but the other male cousins. There were two of them that were five or six years older than the rest of us and they encouraged us in terms of how we approached school and athletics. So I'd say my male cousins played huge roles.

When asked about his experiences within the community, Terrence spoke at length of his experiences on Ward Avenue, the street on which he grew up. He noted that he "...didn't know about other parts of town, but Ward Avenue was to me where everything happened." Terrence explained that he grew up in a community and attended schools where "everyone else looked like" him. He noted that there was very little racial diversity within his community, adding,

There were very few Hispanics. My first experience with White neighbors was when I was in junior high school and my next door neighbor was white. It was an interracial family, and that wasn't really a big deal interestingly enough. It was just the neighbors.

When asked about messages heard from the community about education, Terrence explained “there was not a lot. My mother set the foundation...I think that was because she understood that if she didn’t play that role, there really weren’t many other alternatives for me.” He was not a member of any formal community or recreational centers, but was involved in a number of activities, particularly over the summer months. He noted that his mother involved him in summer programs where most of the time was spent swimming or playing basketball. In high school, Terrence was a member of the basketball and football teams.

Although he acknowledged and appreciated the support of community members and neighbors, he also questions the sincerity of their support and whether this support would have been extended to all young Black men in the community.

... I don’t know that it was true support, in a sense that they knew I was a good student and a good athlete, so I was always being encouraged because of that. But if I wasn’t a good athlete and was just a good student, would the same encouragement have been there? That’s a question that I always pose to myself, and I don’t really know the answer to that.

Overall, Terrence had positive school experiences. He attended one elementary school from kindergarten through sixth grade, where he was a part of their Gifted and Talented Program. He then attended an academically enriched middle school designed specifically for students identified as academically gifted. He remained in an academically enriched program in high school. Terrence spoke at length of his experiences in these Gifted and Talented Programs. He explained that he, along with his classmates was constantly being challenged because they were the “smart kids.” Such ‘teasing’ and “testing” got him suspended on one occasion. He explained that although it

was not the only fight he was in, because of the “testing,” it was the only one he was suspended for. He explained:

You know, I was in Gifted and Talented but that did not mean I was a punk. I could fight just like others could fight. And people definitely wanted to try you because you did well academically. I felt like, I don’t try you just because you don’t do well, why are you trying me because I do well?

He went on to add that:

I think that was the source of a lot of people disliking not only me, but others that were in G&T. And I have to say that even still, I had a different and probably a better experience, because I was an athlete. Because I was a good athlete, there was some jealousy, but it helped.

He went on to add that some of those students who were not trying to fit in, thought they were somehow better than their non-gifted and talented schoolmates. He explained, however, that he did not view his opportunity to be in an academically enriched class as being better than his schoolmates; rather, he recognized the advantage of having such a program in his neighborhood and took advantage of it.

I never thought I was better and I always took it as I’m taking advantage of an opportunity that was presented to me. Again my elementary school was right in my neighborhood, and I was lucky in that I didn’t have to be bussed to the school, where other kids in the program were coming from other parts of the city. So my experiences were different than many other students’ experiences, because when school was out, those same kids knew me, were playing tag with me, were running up and down the street with me. So my experience was different. I never had an opportunity to feel that I was better.

When asked about overall high school experience, Terrence noted that his overall high school experience was a positive one. He had perfect attendance and noted he did not miss even one day of school. He was on the football and basketball teams, student government, and drama club. Despite these successes, he admitted that he did struggle

significantly during his sophomore year. He explained that

It was challenging. Sophomore year, my grades were horrible. I was still trying to fit in to a group of people that I barely knew, I was an athlete, I was chasing older senior girls, I got caught up in it all. But once I settled down, I was a solid, high B student in high school.

When asked about close friends, Terrence explained that as he grew and matured, his friends changed. He noted, however, that there was one friend that he consistently remained friends with. They grew up on the same street and they were always available for each other. He explained his experiences with friends in this manner:

At each phase, there was a different set of friends. In elementary school, there was one group. In junior high school, there were two friends that I was close to. By the time I got to high school, those friends from junior high and elementary, with the exception of one that grew up on the same street as me, were no longer really friends. Then when I went to college, it was an entirely different set of friends, with the exception again of that one guy.

Terrence echoed the importance of his mother's role as he spoke about his friendships. He explained that he could not remain friends with certain people because their primary goal was to "hang out on the corner." He noted that he chose to not hang out on the corner for two reasons:

One, it wasn't tolerated by my mother. My mother is a small lady in stature but I was afraid of my mother. She would come out on the corner and embarrass me if I chose to do that. Two, I didn't see the purpose of it. I didn't sell drugs, I wasn't loud and boisterous. I just really didn't see the purpose. If I saw my boys hanging out there, I'd go say what's up, but I wouldn't spend my whole day there.

Despite being a relatively popular young man, who excelled academically and athletically, Terrence explained that he had his share of insecurities. More specifically, he noted that he was very insecure when it came to approaching females that he found attractive. When asked why, he stated:

Because I grew up with certain insecurities. I never really thought I was attractive. I was always the darkest person. And back then, dark-skinned guys

weren't hot. By the time I got to high school and Wesley Snipes was the "it" guy, I was already self-conscious. I didn't know if girls really liked me.

He explained that he eventually overcame these insecurities as a result of willfully reassuring himself.

I'd say I overcame those feelings out of just a natural progression. Can't really pinpoint the time I no longer felt that way, I just found myself telling myself 'you da bomb.' I mean, if I didn't tell myself and believe it, no one else will. Yes, just a natural progression.

Terrence was also asked about his role models. He explained that he had several people that he admired and modeled his life after: his mother, his maternal grandfather and a basketball coach. Terrence explained that his male role models played vital roles as they taught him things that his mother, by virtue of being a woman, could not have taught him. Terrence notes:

Outside of my mother, I did have a basketball coach, who I met when I was 13 years old. He is actually my best friend today. He was the first guy I saw wearing a suit and tie. He actually taught me how to tie a tie. So it was him, and also, my mother's father. He taught me that no matter what, you make sure that you support your family. Make sure your family has a roof over their head and that there is food on the table: no matter what. That helps me even now.

He went on to add the following when asked more about his basketball coach:

I think as young Black men, we are always looking for positive reinforcement. Someone telling you what you are capable of, rather than telling you what you are incapable of. And without him being overt and saying that, I always knew he believed I was capable and could do whatever I set my mind to. He invested time and effort into me.

Terrence spoke at length of his determination to excel. He explained that he always knew he would graduate from college. He noted that he went back and forth with career choices, considering becoming an accountant or a lawyer or a doctor. He noted, however, that he did not question whether he would go to college and graduate. When

asked about the single most important factor that led to his decision to stay in school, he noted

My father choosing not to be a father and placing that burden of raising three children on my mother. Again, the plan was to be rich so my mom wouldn't have to work. That was the driving force. My mom gave up a lot to make sure her children could have the best. And not just in terms of material things, but that they could have the best experience. Because she preached education and didn't have the opportunity to graduate college herself.

Terrence graduated from high school when he was eighteen years old. He was accepted to and attended The University of Pennsylvania the following Fall semester. He explained that he encountered considerable challenges navigating his place at the university and transitioning to college life.

It was rough at first. You take my transition from middle school to high school and multiply that a hundred-fold. You are talking about people, Black and White, who came from very different worlds than I came from. So that initial adjustment was rough. My first year, I finished up on academic probation. They sent that letter home certified [laughs]. Once I began internalizing a lot of things and began asking myself "why are you here, how did you get here" and telling myself that you are not here because you play football, there's no football scholarship, you are paying to be here and deserve to be here just like the person whose father is CEO of a company, you deserve to be here. Once I started to realize this, that not only do I deserve to be here, but that I am just as capable, just as intelligent, if not more intelligent. Once I accepted that and began to believe that, I really began to enjoy college and started to do well. I talk to kids about the importance of making your college experience not only about what you learn in classroom, but what you learn outside of the classroom, while walking around campus. Those are the lessons you need to take away from college.

Terrence went on to explain that he learned several lessons outside the classroom at the University at Pennsylvania. He believes these lessons should be taught to Black males who are still in high school or who are in the process of transitioning to college. He placed emphasis on

The importance of networking, making sure you are making the right connections, and never being afraid to tell your story. I treat every meeting with someone new as an opportunity, the way I would an interview. I want to leave a good

impression on people and take advantage of resources. And there are a ton of resources in Trenton, and I think I can say the same for most urban areas, but they are not utilized.

He notes that being a Black man from Trenton has had a significant impact on his life decisions and who he is today. He explains

Because of what I have been able to accomplish, and I hate that my experience is atypical...but because it is atypical and because I am Black and because I graduated from Trenton High School, there is a certain amount of respect that I garner from Blacks and Whites. I was able to do something that a lot of people from this area have not been able to do. I don't know that it would've been the same had I been a White male. The reality is that I am a Black man who has done so much more than so many White men could even envision doing. I've been to places around the world and sat in audiences with...I just take my being Black as a blessing, never a curse. Of course I've been in situations where you wonder, is it because I'm Black that they said that to me, but I try not to look at it like that. I never dismiss it though, but take from every experience what I can.

When asked for recommendations to help young Black males in urban areas to remain motivated and stay in school, Terrence echoed the importance of exposing young Black men to different activities. He explained that children from urban areas frequently remain in these areas and are not exposed to other settings and other experiences. He explained that this is the primary reason Black students who do actually graduate from high school have such a hard time transitioning to college. It becomes a "culture shock" that they cannot handle, which might ultimately lead to failing or dropping out of college. He also explained that we must provide resources that help young Black males feel comfortable speaking about their difficulties, their experiences and about who they are.

Terrence spoke poignantly when asked for recommendations for educators, administrators, and support staff to work better with Black males and increase their likelihood of success. He noted that educators must make real attempts to understand the experiences of young Black males.

There are not many teachers who truly understand the experiences of these kids. They don't know that when our kids go home, they go home to truly, truly dysfunctional situations. The kid might not have eaten at home in 3 or 4 days, may not have slept last night. There's a reason that child might be acting up in your classroom. Its not that the kid is dumb, that the kid doesn't want to learn. That may be the case for some, but not the majority of our kids. It's because we don't understand what that kid is going through....I did a piece a couple years ago on the need for our schools to become part of the community and for the community to become part of our schools...how does the school re-engage itself and maybe redefine what the communities are? It's so important to understand the demographics. Understand who you are working with and what their issues are. And that's from top to bottom. School is a big business now. If Nike isn't pumping half a million dollars into a product they are not going to get a big return on, its ridiculous to think that taxpayers should continue to pump the type of money they do into public schools if they are not seeing any type of return. Can we continue to operate the way we have been? No we can't. You can't learn that in college or in graduate school. It might require some home visits, some walking around the community, getting a sense of what the community is... just take a ride through town yourself, get to know parents. That goes a long way.

He goes on to note that many teachers are afraid to come to work in urban areas and they are afraid of Black males, particularly those at the high school level. He explained "teachers can't be afraid of the kids they are working with. You can never reach that kid if you are afraid of him. We really need to rethink how we deliver education."

When asked for recommendations to parents to help their sons stay in school, Terrence explained the importance of being involved.

Because your son turned 13, does not mean your son is a man. Because your son is in high school does not mean your son is a man. If you did not lay the foundation from the beginning, that kid needs you more than ever in high school.

He went on to admonish parents to make sure that their sons feel loved. Whether they hear the words or simply see the acts of love, he stressed that young Black males should never be made to feel unloved

Finally, Terrence had a number of thoughts on the power of the united Black community to change the trajectory of Black males. He addressed the importance of not

just attempting to address change in one neighborhood or one city. Instead, he believes that the entire Black community, on a macro level, must redefine our expectations of schools and expectations for Black children. He states:

As a Black community, we need to redefine parenting and what we expect out of the education system and what we want out of our community. I don't know that we have defined it post civil rights era. Once schools became integrated, I don't know that we continued to define what we need. Maybe I missed it, but we haven't defined who we are and what our expectations are. Individuals have defined it, but I don't know if as a community we've defined it.

Case 2

Wally

At the time of the interview, Wally was employed as head custodian of a public school in an urban area in New Jersey. He agreed to conduct the interview at this school. Prior to beginning the actual interview, Wally expressed much concern about the potential utility of his interview. He did not think he would be able to offer any information that might prove useful. Still, he was willing to participate in the interview and was open and candid throughout. His childhood and high school experiences provide an eye opening account of the struggles, difficulties and accomplishments faced by Black males in urban areas. Wally's story is a success story that followed a trajectory that might not typically lead to success.

Wally is twenty eight years old and currently resides in a suburb of New Jersey with his fiancé and two children. In addition to being employed as head custodian of an elementary school, he is also a student. He explained that he is enrolled in a technical college, working on an associates degree. He is also enrolled in a trade school, where he

is working towards a “low-blue pressure license.” He currently possesses a number of certificates related to heating, ventilation, and maintenance. He explained that “...college isn’t for everyone, but learning is. You can’t ever stop learning. Once you find something you love, learn as much about it as you can.”

Wally grew up in an urban area in New Jersey. He lived with his mother and two brothers. When asked about his home life, he explained that his home life was “...alright. I can’t complain. Had food on the table, clothes on my back.” He noted that his mother was a high school graduate, who “...had to keep two jobs. She worked at the jail and did security during the day.” He explained that although his mother did not have a college degree while he was growing up, she did go on to earn an associates degree.

When asked about his father, Wally explained: “I don’t even know that dude...I’ve seen him two times in my life: when I was seven and when I was twenty-one. He explained that there was no drug or alcohol abuse within his family. When asked about the degree to which family participated in his school life, he explained that “my mom worked two jobs, and she wasn’t really home to participate in my school life, but she made sure we did our homework and she definitely stayed in touch with the school.” He was not particularly close to his extended family, and explained that he did not view the lack of closeness as good or bad. He noted that “It was cool the way it was. You know people go through problems with their families and it was cool.”

When asked who or what was the most important factor in helping him succeed and stay in school, he instantaneously noted “My mother. It wasn’t a choice. Wasn’t a choice.” Similarly, when asked about available supports within the family, he answered “...just mom making sure that homework was done and that things were ok at school.”

Religion played a vital role within Wally's family as well. Just as his mother made it clear that going to school and doing well in school was not a choice, she made it equally clear that going to church was not an option. He explained that "she made us go to church and after a while you just start getting into it. Every Sunday, every Wednesday, every Thursday too for choir rehearsal." Wally went on further to note that he would go to church two or three times a week "for as long as I can remember until I turned 21."

In addition to Wally's extensive church attendance, he also participated in a local recreational center. He explained that he would go there to play basketball and shoot pool, and that the recreational center offered a number of other activities including swimming and baseball. When the interviewer asked Wally if he thought participating in the recreational center was useful, he stated "Yes, it definitely was, it kept me occupied...every weekend, that was my little hang out...from sixth grade until the ending of high school."

Wally was asked a number of questions regarding his experiences within the community. He noted that the city "...was tough. Very tough...but that's not to say you didn't have your good too." When asked what it was like being a Black male in the city, he noted "that's like a trick question, because you're surrounded by a whole lot of other Black men. It was all Black. The only time we saw anything else was the Puerto Ricans at the corner stores. But I'd say it was fair."

When asked about the messages he heard about education while growing up, Wally explained that the people in his neighborhood "...were all pretty much saying the same thing. 'You need to get your education. You don't want to have to struggle like we

struggle.” He explained that the messages he heard came as a result of others in his neighborhood “not having.” Wally noted that they “...couldn’t show us how to succeed because they weren’t successful, they just knew we needed something they didn’t have, and that was an education.”

Wally attended the same elementary school from kindergarten to eighth grade. Similarly, he spent his entire high school career in one high school. Wally frankly disclosed to the interviewer that he was not an “ideal student.” He went on to share that he “...stayed fighting...I’d always get involved in some argument with someone which led to a fight.” He explained that this was consistent in elementary school. Once he got to high school, he noted that he would get suspended occasionally for “not going to school, not paying attention in class, not even going to class.” Wally noted that he’d stay home with girlfriends or “smoking weed and chilling with the fellas...you see weed was more important back then.” The first time he smoked marijuana was during his sophomore year. When asked how easy it was for a 15 year old to secure marijuana, he responded “...very easy. Living in the hood, you can get access to anything.”

Wally astutely noted that all the while he was evidencing these behavior concerns, he did relatively well academically. He noted that he was always an average student, earning B’s and C’s. Wally graduated from high school on time, at seventeen years old, and was never retained. He explained that his mother never gave up on him, despite these behaviors. He lightheartedly noted that he “had to graduate on time...that belt hurt.” He went on to say that paying attention in class was a difficult task for him because “teachers didn’t teach relating to real life issues. Like they didn’t take the

problems we were dealing with in class and relate them to the streets or real life. That's what kids need, they need something to relate to."

Wally noted that he felt terribly disconnected from most teachers in school. He was, however, able to name one teacher in elementary school, who encouraged him to be himself, and not try to "...impress others." Similarly, in high school, he had a teacher who encouraged him to play basketball and keep himself busy. Wally noted that this particular teacher would attend his games and was generally supportive.

Wally continued to discuss the breakdowns in the school system that allowed him to not attend school several days out of the week and still maintain a solid C average. When asked about his attendance in school, he shared that "I'd come to the building to get attendance taken and then I was out of the building." He went on to note that when he was caught and was suspended it was "not for long, maybe two days each time...It wasn't a big deal. You really weren't missing anything."

Socially, Wally functioned well. In fact, he noted that he had too many friends. He added that he had a best friend, who he met in elementary school. "...we are still friends. We were in the same grade together and basically did most things together." When Wally was asked who helped him to get through difficult experiences, he stated, "you just had to look at everybody else's situation and from that I just motivated myself. I had to." The interviewer followed up by saying: "so you were forced to motivate yourself?" Wally responded, "yeah, you just had to stay motivated so you could change your lifestyle."

When asked about childhood role models, Wally laughed and said "can we go to the next question?" Although he was good-humored in this response, there was a great

amount of seriousness. He added “there wasn’t nobody else to look up to. My mother maybe. I can say my mother, watching her struggle, but that was it. That’s where you get being strong from.” When asked about qualities he would have liked to see in role models, he emphasized the desire to have a role model who was a good father. He added that this encourages him to be a better father. He went on to note that being from an urban area inner city propelled him to do better in life. He notes that he looked to escape the violence, poverty and negativity: “I felt like I could escape it and be something.”

The final section of the interview sought to garner recommendations for Black males, teacher, administrators and parents. When asked to give recommendations specifically to young Black men to remain motivated and stay in school, he cautioned young Black males against being lax and having too much free time. Wally explained that in order to combat this, they should “get involved in more recreation. Take different trips, get involved in activities. Put more youth programs, that’s what you really need, like Big Brother programs.”

He also reprimanded teachers, noting that their level of commitment to children, particularly young Black men, is lacking. Wally believes that teachers “...could do some real teaching. Be more dedicated to the students instead of the paycheck. Talk more to the kids, because these days, the kids talk more to the custodians than to the teachers. They relate to us. Most of them are going through problems at home that the teachers don’t know anything about, because they come from the suburbs.”

Wally noted that one of the primary contributors to the high attrition rate is the lack of father involvement. He notes that many young Black males are “...looking for role models...most of them just need fathers and a little love.” Lastly, when asked to

give recommendations to Black parents and family members for helping their sons stay in school, he aptly noted that parents must “take time out for their kids. Find out what’s going on with them in the schools, find out if something is bothering them if they are doing bad. Show them things, take them places. Kids will stay in the hood if they never get the chance to get out the hood. Parents need to take them out the hood.”

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION

This study sought to examine a number of factors that led to graduation from high school among eleven Black males in high risk urban areas in New Jersey. A number of themes and striking commonalities emerged from the participants' responses. Broad themes associated with school persistence among these men included factors related to the individual, family, peers, community and teachers. Specific factors underlying these themes were found to play significant roles in the participants' decision to persist in school. More specifically, themes of individual self determination, resilience, personal relational networks and strong social capital were recurring. These themes will be discussed. Recommendations from participants for parents, schools, policy makers and young Black men will be outlined. Limitations of the study and implications for future research will be discussed along with implications for the schools, parents, community members, as well as implications for policy makers. Because of the small sample size, readers should avoid generalizing the results of this study to the broader population of Black males from urban areas.

The primary goal of this particular study was to explore commonalities among these Black men. What factors helped these young men complete high school in these

otherwise exigent environments? Participants' responses to interview questions indicated that a number of protective factors contributed to their successes. First, all participants noted the importance of support from their personal networks. These supports ranged in varying levels from family support, to support from teachers and administrators in the school environment, to support from community organizations and peers.

Personal Relational Networks

Family

When asked about factors that contributed to their decision to stay in school, time and time again, participants' responses included the importance of their family members. The role of the family as a strength of Black families is well documented in the professional literature (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Murray & Naranjo, 2008). Although family support, in general, was an important protective factor and played a critical role in helping participants complete school, the role of mothers, in particular, was paramount. Participants noted the importance of their mothers' role as the single most important factor that led to graduation from high school.

The majority of respondents in this small sample were reared in single parent homes. This is certainly not a rare occurrence in urban areas or among Black families (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Boyd-Franklin, Franklin & Toussaint, 2000; Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993). Although much of the literature finds that the presence of biological fathers in the home is positively related to high school graduation, the participants in this small sample did not fit this profile. Several studies have found that children from single-parent homes are less likely to graduate from high school and have worse academic and social

outcomes (Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993; Lee & Burkam, 2000; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Williams, et al., 2002). Despite no father presence, these interviewees were successful.

Most participants in this study mentioned the importance of active parental involvement. The importance of active involvement, particularly in the early years, was one factor that many participants noted as vital to their success. Furthermore, all participants shared that their mothers, more than any other family member, played an active role in their school life. This active involvement included more than just checking homework or going to PTA meetings, it also included an emphasis on the importance of education. This finding supports the literature that “adolescents whose parents maintain high involvement and support during high school do significantly better and are more likely to adopt positive coping strategies in response to academic difficulty and stress” (Roderick, 2003).

Even though most mothers did not attain high levels of education, and several were high school dropouts themselves, participants noted that their mothers expected them to do well. This expectation to excel and unwillingness to allow their sons to settle or to fail was a major commonality among these men. This finding was not expected by the researcher and not consistent with much of the literature. Several researchers have found that parental education attainment is a significant contributor to graduation and academic success among Black males (Barnes, 1992; Lee & Burkam, 2000; Williams, et al, 2002). This was not the case in this study. Despite relatively low levels of parent education attainment, expectations were high for the participants. Researchers have noted an expected association between low parent education and low parent expectations:

“Closely related to their own educational backgrounds are the parent expectations for their children’s academic success” (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000, p. 571). However among this sample, low parent education was not indicative of low parents’ expectations. In fact, low parent education appeared to bolster these parents’ expectations for their sons.

This is exemplified in one participant’s statement:

I guess as most parents, my mother wanted us to do better than she did. She knew that because she didn’t go to college, and because she did have children early, she was at a disadvantage. She wanted to make sure we didn’t suffer because of that. She pushed us to be better than she was...she expected us to do better than she did.

In addition to the important role of mothers, participants noted the important role of family members. In different ways, participants noted the importance of uncles, cousins, siblings and grandparents. The literature on success stories in high risk contexts echoes the importance of family as a source of support (Barnes, 1992; Boyd-Franklin et al., 2000; Murray & Naranjo, 2008). Boyd-Franklin et al. (2000), note that “the involvement of extended family members has often been the glue...” that has kept African American communities strong (p. 31). They go on to add that family members have often made the difference in the lives of young Black men. This was the case with many of the participants in this study. A number of interviewees noted that they garnered much needed support from their uncles, who helped them with their homework; their cousins, who taught them how to play basketball; and their grandmothers, who were available to give advice and encouragement. Such active, but varying roles, proved to be essential in the lives of these young Black males.

Community

Availability and utilization of community resources was another important theme that emerged from this study. Respondents' participation in community organizations and agencies was key in forming supportive relational networks. The large majority of participants noted that they were members of community centers, neighborhood sports teams, or simply played in neighborhood fields open for basketball, football etc. This theme carried over as participants were asked to give recommendations for keeping other young Black males in school. The majority emphasized the importance of keeping "busy" and "out of the streets." Keeping busy and out of the streets for participants meant participating in activities. Despite the "...increasing deterioration of many urban areas and negative aspects of these communities, there is evidence that community resources and institutions have a beneficial effect" (Williams et al., 2002, p. 414).

Analysis of participants' interviews indicates that accessibility to community resources depended largely on the neighborhood in which they were raised. Furthermore, several participants raised in Newark indicated that they had greater access to supports than others raised in different parts of the city. It appears that there are tremendous inequities within the city. Availability and access to resources increased or decreased depending on the section of the city in which the participants resided. Other participants noted that they had to seek out community activities in neighboring towns or cities. One participant from Irvington shared that he attended a recreational center in Newark, as there wasn't one available in his neighborhood. Another participant from Trenton noted that he loved to bowl, but did not have access to a bowling league in his area, and as such had to join a league in a neighboring suburban town, Hamilton. Williams et al. (2002)

note that students in neighborhoods with more organized activities and resources available do better than those in neighborhoods without these resources. Fortunately, these participants and their parents were determined and willing to seek out these supports and resources that otherwise would not have been available.

Supports/Relationships within the school

Throughout the study, the importance of the school environment, as well as the importance of support and availability of school staff and teachers was emphasized. In fact, all of the participants were able to name at least one teacher as an important source of support in school. What was particularly striking is that all participants were able to name and detail at least one specific incident where a teacher was particularly supportive. When asked for recommendations, as well, all participants emphasized the importance of teachers' "caring," "speaking their language" and "relating."

Moreover, participants emphasized the importance of ongoing involvement and some degree of persistence on the part of these teachers. Croninger & Lee (2001) note that having a supportive relationship with a teacher is an important protective factor that significantly decreases the likelihood that a student will drop out. In this study, several participants mentioned the importance of persistent teachers who wanted to ensure they excelled. One participant noted that one high school teacher consistently returned sub-prime work to him and refused to accept such work. Eventually, the participant noted he started to do well because he was "tired of getting" his papers back ungraded.

It should be noted that even though literature indicates the importance of similarities in teacher-student ethnicity, the participants in this study did not view this as paramount in forming valuable, caring relationships with Black male students. Many

emphasized that while it is important for Black males to have teachers and role models present that “look like” them, teachers, regardless of race can form meaningful relationships with their students. Murray & Naranjo (2008) found that having a teacher of a different race did not prohibit closeness in teacher-student relationships. It should be noted that while participants in this study did not believe race prohibited closeness in teacher-student relationships, they thought that exposure to Black male teachers would be encouraging to Black male students and provide opportunities for positive role modeling.

Peers

It is widely accepted that peers have an influence on their friends’ behaviors. Battin-Pearson et al. (2000) go on to add that peers also have considerable influence over the academic achievement of their friends. Dropouts tend to have more deviant friends, who also show potential for dropping out. In this study, peer relationships appeared to play a vital role in building the participants’ social capital and the strength of their personal networks. The importance of maintaining positive, consistent peer relations is one that is relatively scarce in the literature on young Black males (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Hymel, Comfort, Schonert-Reichl & McDougall, 1996). In fact, some research views isolationism, and the willingness to “...forgo many, if not all, peer relationships within the context of school” (Murray & Naranjo, 2008, p. 152) as protective factors that increase the likelihood that Black males will persist in high school. However, in this exploratory study, the importance of having a core group of friends who were positive and appeared to keep the participants “grounded” and “centered” was very important.

Ten of the eleven participants shared that they had very good friends in school, and no one noted feelings of isolation.

Another recurring theme when friends and peers were discussed was the concept of a “core group of friends.” For the most part, these were friends that the participants knew since elementary grades. They grew up together, visited each others homes, played sports together, and their families knew one another well. Importantly, parents’ involvement did not decrease as these young men got older and more involved with their peer groups. Instead, these parents also became involved in the lives of their sons’ friends. This process further contradicts much of the research that has shown a pattern of decreasing parental involvement as African American males become more involved in peer groups (Roderick, 2003). The synergy between the home environment and peers appears to have a positive influence on graduation outcomes.

Another factor relating to peer group influence in this study is the participants’ need to “prove themselves.” Because a number of participants excelled academically and were in gifted and talented or academically enriched programs, they were often viewed as “punks” and were “tested” by their schoolmates. The idea that being smart is somehow equated to being a “nerd,” “stuck-up” or even “acting White” is supported in the literature (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Boyd-Franklin, et al., 2000; Hrabowski, Maton & Grief, 1998; Kunjufu, 1988). Furthermore, Black students who do well academically are often teased or ostracized by their school mates. Kunjufu (1988) notes that bright Black male students may cope with this pressure in a number of ways, including refusing to study in public places, fighting, becoming the class clown, or excelling in sports. The participants in this study noted that they did at times get into fights, in an effort to prove themselves

to their schoolmates. One participant noted the mediating effect of excelling in sports. He explained that had he not excelled in basketball and football, he would have been picked on and ostracized by his school mates. He went on to add that his classmates in the academically enriched program were frequently picked on.

Individual Determination

The theme of individual determination was brought up in some way by all the participants. It ranged from statements like “I always knew I was going to graduate...graduating from college was an absolute must,” to “I knew that I had to graduate to get the things I wanted.” Although this theme was raised in several ways, what is common among these participants is that they had a strong sense of self-determination: they wanted to succeed. They internalized the idea that education was important and that it would provide them with opportunities that might not otherwise be available to them. This internalization might be a result of the high expectations set by their parents since they were youngsters. There was a willingness on the part of participants to advocate for themselves, to seek out supports when needed, and to ask for help when necessary. The importance of individual self determination as it relates to graduation among high risk, urban students is getting more attention in the literature (Knesting & Waldron, 2006; Murray & Naranjo, 2008). These findings suggest that it is important that Black males in urban areas be provided with various opportunities to learn self-advocacy skills. As well, it suggests that parents and teachers must continue to emphasize the benefits of education to these students.

Limitations of this Research Study

There were a number of limitations to this study. First, the study used a qualitative approach. The research questions that were developed were exploratory in nature, and as such, neither confirmed nor refuted other research that examined factors leading to graduation among Black males in urban settings. Second, the sampling of Black male participants was derived from a networked sample. It was not randomized nor was there a control group for comparison. Third, the small sample size did not allow for generalization of findings to other Black males or other students in urban settings. Fourth, the study was vulnerable to examiner bias because the researcher developed the questions, located individuals for the sample, analyzed the data, and developed the findings, recommendations, and conclusions. Finally, this was an exploratory study and readers should be cautious about generalizing from these results. Still, this study generated a wealth of data, which might be further examined in future research.

Implications for Future Research

This study has explored the experiences of Black male graduates of urban high schools in New Jersey. Few studies have explored the experiences of Black males who graduate from high school and have instead focused largely on Black males that drop out. There is a definite need to explore the unique, individual experiences of Black male graduates in high risk urban areas. More specifically, there is a further need for qualitative studies that allow for examination of underlying reasons and circumstances that lead to graduation. Another option for future research would be to utilize a larger

number of participants. A larger study would produce more information and might yield greater generalizability.

The role of positive peer relations as a factor in building resilience was an important theme in this study. It is largely undocumented in the literature and, as such, provides another avenue for future research. For the most part, participants in this study avoided building close friendships with deviant peers, and instead maintained positive peer relationships. This could be perceived as an adaptive skill or a function of their resilience. This is an issue that warrants further attention in future research.

Future studies might also explore the role of African American single mothers in the education of their children. Contrary to much of the literature, the findings in this study suggests that despite low levels of educational attainment, these mothers set very high expectations for their sons. In fact, most participants credited their mothers with their success. Further exploration of such experiences will likely yield a wealth of data.

Another option for future studies might be to conduct a study that is more longitudinal in nature. Such a study will help to provide a much more comprehensive model of development that considers influence from school, family, communities and peers over time. It would also provide the opportunity for researchers to learn more about the experiences of young Black males beyond high school. A number of participants shared the difficulties encountered after high school, as well as ways in which high school prepared them for future life experiences. Investigating such factors would delve more into the life stories of these men, and provide opportunities for greater generalization of life commonalities and protective factors.

Implications for Parents/Families

The relationship between community organizations and schools on outcomes of Black males is well documented in the literature. As such, the findings related to these factors, although informative, were not surprising. What was unexpected was the function of mothers, particularly single, poorly educated mothers, in the lives of their sons. More than any other factor, participants named their mothers as their greatest supporters. They credited their mothers as role models and for setting high expectations. Accordingly, these findings have tremendous implications for parents of Black males. It should be noted, however, that these implications extend to other family members as well. They too provide invaluable supports to Black males.

First, parents and family members, regardless of educational background or socioeconomic status, must recognize the magnitude of their roles in the lives of young Black men. The role parents and family members choose to play will invariably affect the lives of Black males. Participants in this study placed tremendous emphasis on the importance of feeling supported by their mothers and other family members. Even more, many looked to parents, grandparents, cousins and uncles as sources of encouragement. Parents should recognize the necessity of talking to their sons. Boyd-Franklin et al. (2000) note that the “best remedy to combat negative consequences is to make sure that you talk to your son about the pressures they may be experiencing.” They go on further to note the importance of active listening and “resisting the urge to rush to the solution” (p. 96).

Parents and family members must recognize the importance of showing these young men that they are loved. Showing love is not always expressed in the same way.

One participant noted that parents should: "...never, ever allow your child, particularly your male child, to feel unloved." He went on to add that even though he did not hear the words "I love you" from his own mother, he felt loved.

My mother didn't tell me she loved me until I was 27 years old, but I knew it. I knew because I was able to see the sacrifices she made. I knew because she was involved. My mother worked nights from 11-7 and my brother and I were just so involved in so many different athletic events, and she would get us to practice everyday and it was a 45 minute commute each way. She did all these things, a lot of times, without sleep, and so she didn't have to tell me she loved me. If that wasn't love, I don't know what love is. So just make sure your child feels loved and not be afraid to express that.

Parents should also be active participants in their sons' school life. Parents should not view themselves as by-standers in the educational process and should not be intimidated by school staff or administrators. The role of parents in attending meetings, forming relationships with teachers, guidance counselors and administrators, as well as forming a positive relationship between home and school is imperative to the success of Black males. It is also important that parents become advocates for their sons and equally important that they set high expectations. Low expectations are frequently set for Black males within the school system. To ensure that these negative expectations are not internalized by young Black males, parents and family members must set high expectations. Black males should begin to internalize, at very young ages, the idea that they can succeed and will excel in spite of societal barriers.

Lastly, the importance of getting young Black males from urban areas involved in extracurricular activities and keeping them busy after school, on weekends and over summer breaks cannot be emphasized enough. The reality is that urban communities are frequently dysfunctional and riddled with poverty, violence, drugs, and overall negativity. Although Black males should recognize that these realities do exist in their

neighborhoods, they should also be provided with alternatives and should not have the opportunity to become enthralled by the streets. Parents and family members must find out about activities that are available for free or low cost within the community, within churches or in local schools. The availability of resources is limited in many areas, and parents might have to seek out additional activities in nearby towns or cities.

Implications for Community-Based Organizations

The implications for communities and community-based organizations are tremendous. This study found that extracurricular engagement not only allowed the participants in this study to identify and nurture their talents, but helped them to develop positive support networks and positive alternatives to the streets. Participants attributed much of their successes to community based organizations. These organizations played a pivotal role in the development of these young men. Youth and community organizations “...can provide a bridge that engages students when they feel schools are inattentive to their needs. This may be particularly true in neighborhoods where there are few places to be that are safe, organized and academically stimulating” (Williams et al., 2002, p. 427).

Urban communities must first ensure, through policy and appropriate disbursement of funds, that extracurricular activities are available and equally accessible to young people, particularly young Black males. These programs should focus on reducing risk factors and promoting positive protective factors within the community. Activities should range from those that are recreational in nature to those that promote academic gains. They should also include activities that promote mental health, like counseling. These organizations must then determine whether these activities are enough

to attract and retain these young Black men. Just as school staff should be sensitive to the needs of Black males, so should staff members in community organizations. Lastly, it is essential that community organizations partner with parents, schools, churches and other neighborhood institutions. Such partnerships will help to build upon and create support networks.

Implications for Schools

This study has suggested that there are a number of school factors that create barriers for success among Black males. One factor that should be examined is the curriculum. In any school, the curriculum should be meaningful and effective. Designing curricula, particularly for urban, high risk areas, that will reflect multiracial and multiethnic factors is essential. Curricula should be designed to avoid racial stereotypes and be meaningful, effective and engaging to Black males.

It is of utmost importance, as well, that high schools develop and nurture school environments that provide Black males with the best opportunities to become successful. Roderick puts it best when she notes that schools should not be "...places in which only the resilient can be successful" (Roderick, 2003, p. 580). Rather, schools must promote high achievement, high expectations and quality teaching that is structured and personal. There should be opportunities to build relationships with adults. As well, schools must provide students with consistent academic and behavioral expectations.

Teachers and other professional staff

It is no secret that teachers are vitally important to a student's experiences in school. Because the teacher, more than other school staff, has continuous contact with the child, the relationship that exists between the student and the teacher will likely have a lasting impact on the students' perceptions of school and the students' attitudes toward school. It is imperative that teachers build relationships with their students. This can be achieved in a number of ways that will ensure that teachers gain insight and better understand the students they are working with. There is a tremendous need for raised consciousness of teachers about the needs of Black males. This will not be achieved through singular efforts; rather, there is a need for collaboration between professional organizations, school districts and the U.S Department of Education.

There is also a need for more Black teachers in the schools to act as role models for these children. Still, it should not thwart the importance of having teachers, of any race, who genuinely care about and want to work with Black males. As well, teachers should be willing and available to provide support to all students, not just those in academically enriched or gifted programs.

Implications for Policy Makers, Mental Health Providers & Clinicians

The results of this study have implications for current policy initiatives on school performance and accountability. One such area of accountability must be for dropout rates among Black males. It should not be commonplace for two out of every three Black males in urban areas to drop out of school. Despite these ghastly statistics, there is no

accountability on the part of our schools. If there was more accountability within schools for graduation outcomes, schools would be more apt to make an effort to improve Black student achievement.

There is certainly a need for public policy that creates institutions and intervention strategies that build social capital and networks. The importance of the connection between school, family, community and mental health is one that merits considerable attention. This study suggests that there is a great need for community, family and school models that are geared towards building strength, resilience and nurturing the mental health of young Black males. One such program guided by this principle is implemented by The Center for Family, Community, and Social Justice (CFCSJ), located in Princeton, NJ. CFCSJ provides training, psychotherapy, and counseling "...from a perspective which emphasizes the social, economic and cultural realities..." of at-risk teens and their families (Wetzel, 2009, p. 2).

The Family Empowerment Program is a model developed and implemented by CFCSJ that is geared toward family consultations with adolescents who live in areas of economic deprivation. The goals of the Family Empowerment Program are to make counseling opportunities available to adolescents and their families within the school setting and counter the inevitable risk factors these young people face to prevent substance abuse, school dropout, criminalization, and violence. Such a program, when successfully implemented, provides young Black men with opportunities to build their personal relational networks and increase their likelihood of success by simultaneously addressing the student, family, school, peer group and community contexts. The emphasis on collaboration helps to provide consistent structure and support.

Implementing collaborative programs of this type within urban school settings is one that merits replication and more attention from policy makers and school leaders.

Clinicians

Because African Americans are largely reluctant to seek help from mental health professionals, the likelihood that young Black males will be seen in traditional mental health settings is relatively low. As such, mental health agencies need to explore nontraditional, less threatening locations for their services, such as within the school setting as in the Family Empowerment Program described above. Other such locations might include within community-based and religious organizations or within the home. Seeking out locations that are comfortable and familiar will improve the mental health providers' ability to build rapport and client "buy in."

One participant, who works at an urban high school, shared the importance of providing mental health services to young Black males, but noted the reluctance on the part of these students to seek out or accept these services. He goes on to note the detrimental outcomes of not accepting these services.

...particularly for young men, we have to become comfortable speaking about who we are. At the high school, we have School Based Youth Services, with two mental health clinicians and I try to force them to go see these clinicians, because you can't keep walking around with these things bottled up. We have to create an environment, where they feel comfortable sharing their experiences with someone else. Help them to understand that it doesn't mean they are crazy for talking to a clinician, but understanding that your mental health is extremely, extremely, extremely important. We bottle so much up because we think we are being tough or being manly, so we walk around with it pent up inside of us. And in many cases, a lot of Black men are walking time bombs and we explode. Sometimes, our easiest target is our women....So when we talk about spousal abuse and domestic violence, I'd venture to say that nine times out of ten, it's not an insecure man, it's a man who has bottled so much pain, hurt, anger inside of him, that the smallest thing sets him off....Because he didn't utilize the resources we

talked about or did not feel comfortable exercising some of the options he had, she gets the brunt of it...because they were weak enough to allow society to define their manhood and define what they are able to do with it.

The importance of cultural sensitivity cannot be emphasized enough. Clinicians are also encouraged to consider the individual experiences of young Black males and determine how they can facilitate positive outcomes and mental health functioning. Psychoeducation strategies that teach clients positive coping strategies and incorporate various approaches into therapy are crucial.

Conclusions

Black males from urban areas are at a significant disadvantage as they frequently come from backgrounds that handicap them from the start. Coming from some of the poorest and most violent communities, these young men are seemingly doomed for a trajectory that ends in failure. The young men in this study described home lives that included some parents addicted to drugs, incarcerated or far removed from their lives. Despite these difficulties, the conditions of poverty and social disadvantages did not fully capture the lives or values of these young men. Instead they told stories of strength and their amazing ability to meet success in the face of great obstacles. These young men had access to support networks within their homes, communities and schools.

These findings suggest that it is the synergy between family, peer, community and school supports that lead to successful outcomes for Black males in high risk urban contexts. Studies such as this one are important, because they offer insight into the experiences of these resilient young men. It highlights not only the strengths of these individuals, but also the importance of supports within the family, community and

schools. Although the participants in this study were successful in that they graduated from high school, the challenges they faced and continued to face after graduation are complex.

If we are to make attempts at solving the dropout problem, we must first recognize that the problems young Black males face are greater than the microcosms of family, school and community and extend to broader social and structural macrocosms. Achieving widespread improvement in the dropout crisis requires systemic changes geared towards eliminating the gap in graduation rates between Black males from urban areas and their counterparts.

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APPENDIX A

INFORMED CONSENT AGREEMENT

Black Male Graduates of Urban High Schools in New Jersey: An Exploratory Study

You are invited to participate in a research study that explores the experiences of Black males who graduated from high school. This study is being conducted as a fulfillment of dissertation and doctoral requirements. Aldean Beaumont, a doctoral student at the Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology at Rutgers University, is conducting this study. Before you agree to participate in this study, you should know enough about it to make an informed decision. If you have any questions, ask the investigator. You should be satisfied with the answers before you agree to be in the study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose is to identify factors affecting Black males' decisions to stay in school until graduating. It is the goal of this study to examine factors leading to positive outcomes for Black male students. Unlike previous research on this subject, this study will focus on the individual experiences of Black men.

Study Procedures:

You will be interviewed about your experiences, thoughts and opinions in regards to your experiences of growing up in an urban area, attending an urban high school and graduating. It will provide an opportunity for you to share your experiences with the purpose of increasing the knowledge of educators and policy makers on factors that affect Black males' decision to stay in school. The interview will take about one and one-half hours. Between 10-20 individuals will participate in this study.

With your permission, interviews will be audio taped to contribute to the authenticity of the study. Interviews will be transcribed and tapes will be destroyed after transcription. You may choose not to be audiotaped and still participate in this study. For participants who choose not to be audiotaped, the investigator will take notes during the interview. Any tape recordings, transcripts of interviews, or other data collected from you will be maintained in confidence by the investigator in a locked file cabinet and destroyed at the end of the study.

Upon conclusion of the interview, you may complete an index card with your contact information only for the purposes of enrolling in a lottery for a gift certificate for \$50. At the end of the research study, one index card will be drawn at random and the participant of this index card will receive the gift certificate. After the lottery has concluded all index cards with contact information will be shredded. If you decide to withdraw from the study before you complete the interview, you will not be entered in the drawing.

Risks: The interview focuses on your past experiences. Recalling some unpleasant memories may cause discomfort to you. If you experience major distress related to the study, please contact the researcher, so that she can provide you with the necessary referrals.

Benefits: Your experience and knowledge have tremendous value to understanding the issues that Black males face, as well as developing services to address the needs of young Black men. In

addition, the opportunity to share your experience and expertise in working with this population may be valuable to you.

Confidentiality: All records will be stored in locked files and will be kept **confidential** to the extent permitted by law. The data about your interview will be stored on an electronic data file in the researcher's personal computer to keep confidential. The data will be available only to the research team and no identifying information will be disclosed. Audiotapes and other paper work will be assigned a case number.

Your responses will be grouped with other participants' responses and analyzed collectively. When the results of the study are reported in any form they will be reported as group results. All common identifying information will be disguised to protect your confidentiality. This will include changing your name and other demographic information. (i.e. high school attended).

Research Standards and Rights of Participants: Your participation in this research is **voluntary**. If you decide not to participate, or if you decide later to stop participating, you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Also, if you refer other individuals for participation in this study, your name may be used as the referral source only with your permission

You may contact the investigator or the investigator's dissertation chairperson at any time at the addresses, telephone numbers or e-mail addresses listed below if you have any questions, concerns or comments regarding your participation in this study.

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Email: boydfrank@aol.com

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Sponsored Programs Administrator at Rutgers University at:

Rutgers University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
3 Rutgers Plaza
New Brunswick, NJ 08901-8559
(732) 932-0150 x. 2104.
Email: humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu

I have read and understood the contents of this consent form and have received a copy of it for my files. I consent to participate in this research project.

Participant Signature _____ Date _____

Investigator Signature _____ Date _____

I give my permission for the interview to be audiotaped.

Signature _____ Date _____

APPENDIX B

Black Male Graduates' Demographic Questionnaire

Black Male Graduates of Urban High Schools in New Jersey: An Exploratory Study

1. Age: _____
2. Marital Status:
 - a. Single _____
 - b. In a Relationship _____
 - c. Married _____
 - d. Separated _____
 - e. Divorced _____
 - f. Widowed _____
3. Current Occupation
4. Income level
5. Religious Affiliation

APPENDIX C

Black Male Graduates' Interview Protocol

Black Male Graduates of Urban High Schools in New Jersey: An Exploratory Study

PART I – Experiences in Family

1. Who did you live with growing up?
2. What was your home life like?
3. Parents' education level. Did your parents finish school?
4. What was your family's approximate income level? (parents/guardian occupation or source of income)
5. Was there alcohol or drug use within the family? Abuse? Explain.
6. To what degree did family participate in your school life?
7. How do you feel about the degree of connection you have with your family? Do you wish you had more or less contact with them? Why?
8. Who or what was most important in helping you succeed/persevere in school?
9. To what degree did you get academic support at home? (homework, grades, communication with school, etc)
10. What role did religion play in your life? In your family's life?
11. What supports were available to you in your family?

PART II – Experiences in Community

12. What was it like living in your community?
13. What was it like being a Black male in that community?
14. What was the racial/cultural background of the communities you lived in?

15. What was the racial/cultural background of the elementary school(s) you attended?
16. What was the racial/cultural background of the high school(s) you attended?
17. What was that experience like for you?
18. What messages did you hear about education while growing up?
19. Do you think your experience would have been different if you had lived in another community? Explain.
20. What community-based events did you participate in? Which were most important to you?
21. What supports were available to you in the community?

PART III – Experiences in school

22. What schools did you attend growing up?
23. How many high schools have you been in?
24. At what age did you graduate high school?
25. How would you describe these schools?
26. What did you like the most about each particular school?
27. What did you like least about _____ school?
28. Were any teachers, administrators, and staff particularly supportive? If yes, describe in detail.
29. What was your attendance like in school?
30. How were your grades in school?
31. Were you ever suspended/expelled/ disciplined at school? Describe/Discuss.
32. Did you participate in any extracurricular activities?
33. What supports were available to you in school? (i.e. social, academic, teacher support)

34. From your perspective, tell me how your community did or did not influence your feelings about education?

PART III – Experiences with peers/friends

35. How did you function socially? Close friends? Isolated?
36. Who, if anyone, were you closest to when you were attending school?
37. Who has helped you get through those experiences that were difficult for you?
38. Who were some of your role models growing up?
39. What qualities of those role models have you tried to incorporate into your adult life?
40. Did many of your classmates/school mates go on to graduate from high school?
41. Did many of your classmates/school mates go on to college?

PART IV – Current Experiences

42. What would you say is the single most important factor that influenced your decision to stay in school?
43. What are you currently doing? School? Work?
44. Where do you live? Urban/suburban
45. How has your being a Black man from an urban area affected your life and decisions?

PART V – Recommendations and Suggestions

46. What are your recommendations for helping young Black males in urban areas to remain motivated and stay in school?
47. What are your recommendations for helping educators, administrators, and policy makers work better with Black males to increase their likelihood of success?

48. What do you think could be done to make it easier to increase the retention rate of Black men in high school?
49. What are your recommendations to Black parents and family members for helping their sons stay in school?