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An American Public High School Ethnographic Study: Effectively Preparing African American Male Students for Academic Success

by

Demarius J. Howard

A Dissertation submitted to the Education Faculty of Lindenwood University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

Doctor of Education

School of Education

An American Public High School Ethnographic Study: Effectively Preparing African American Male Students for Academic Success

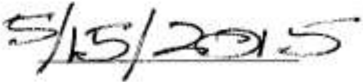
by

Demarius J. Howard

This dissertation has been approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

at Lindenwood University by the School of Education



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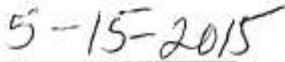

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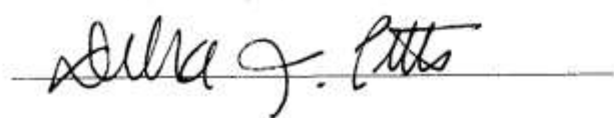

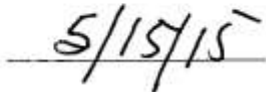

Debra J. Pitts, Committee Member

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Declaration of Originality

I do hereby declare and attest to the fact that this is an original study based solely upon my own scholarly work here at Lindenwood University and that I have not submitted it for any other college or university course or degree here or elsewhere.

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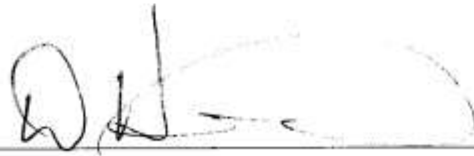
Signature:  Date: 5/15/2015

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to engage in ethnographic research involving Jack E. Singley High School (JESA), which was part of the Irving Independent School District in Irving, Texas and recognized throughout the state as one of its most successful high schools. Singley High School had a population of 1600, with 88% minority students, who continued to exhibit academic achievement. The researcher evidenced specific interest in the performance of African-American male students at Singley, since this academic performance consistently received national recognition. This sub-population had been described as experiencing an 'achievement gap'. However at Singley, African-American males were succeeding. The researcher explored how this high school was effective in preparing its African American male students for academic success through interviews of individual students who demonstrated the ability to succeed in the academic arena under challenging personal and cultural circumstances.

The results of the study highlighted the importance of collaborative learning in self-efficacy and illustrated the power of student 'buy in', when the students could directly relate their academic work to tangible career goals. Increasing, the relevancy of academics and preparing students for life beyond high school afforded clear-cut goals and added value to education, increasing student motivation and student academic success. One of the most surprising insights from this research, for the researcher, had nothing to do with academics, though its positive connection to success was clear. The insight was the gratitude that students vocalized for being accepted as a part of a professional institution and learning the tenets of professionalism, which allowed them to view themselves in a more positive way.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Traditionally, the primary focus among public schools within the United States consisted solely of offering each student a quality education designed to widen the scope of opportunity while providing the developmental skills needed to attain success after graduation (Boyer & Wolf Hamil, 2008). Mason (2011) defined a quality education as the foundation of American society and the fuel that enabled graduates to contribute positively to today's changing economy. D'Amico (2003) linked education to autonomy, saying that education afforded "an individual options, the knowledge to act and choose independently, and the power to turn dreams and aspirations into reality. Education, in other words, is really what determines how much freedom we have" (para. 1).

Overview

A quality education served as the structure upon which student success created opportunities and accessibility for every American. Darling-Hammond (2000) noted that students achieved success due to state and national requirements for excellence combined with strong teacher preparation and certification requirements. In the researcher's experience, the U.S. Department of Education's (2007) statement, "Promoting Educational Excellence for all Americans" (header, p. 1) served as a standard for all states, regions, and local school constituents. This belief in the value of education provided hope for U.S. citizens, immigrants, and foreign-exchange students who relocated to the United States of America for these very educational opportunities (Erisman & Looney, 2007).

Although these educational standards provided skills that allowed all students to strive for success and pursue an immediate entrance into the workforce, vocational, and

technical programs, higher education, and the military services, not all public secondary institutions effectively prepared their African-American male students for professional lives after a high school graduation. A study conducted by The Schott Foundation for Public Education (Holzman, 2006) found that 52% of African American males who entered ninth grade in the 2006-2007 school year graduated in four years, when compared to the 78% of White, non-Latino males and 58% of Latino males (p. 7). It became apparent that the public education system operated under an imperative to provide and promote a quality education to the African American males that would allow them to achieve an education through high school and prepare them for college.

Donnor and Shockley (2010) found in their study on the No Child Left Behind Act and its correlation to minorities and the economy, that "public schools now more than any other time in American history [were] held accountable for preparing students to serve the private interests and the public good" (p. 44). The more challenging core curriculum subjects, in which minorities often struggled, such as Algebra II, were viewed as gatekeeper classes through which college could be obtained only with a passing grade in high school (Fensterwald, 2012). However, both teaching and remediation, in order to be successfully accomplished, needed to include components to convince students of the importance of academic excellence, allowing them to see the value of further education.

Hines and Holcomb-McCoy (2011) proposed that a positive school climate was important to students' academic success and to building value into the academic process so students wanted to succeed. Using mentorship and the students' own culture as agents in learning further established the likelihood that students would grasp the fundamental importance of a college education; find their place in the workforce, and procure the

skills needed to achieve personal success (Johnson & Kritsonis, 2006). In response to this need, schools throughout the country offered their students core courses across the various subjects that met the college admission standards and covered basic curriculum, supporting overall student success across the nation in reading, composition, mathematics, and scientific reasoning (Grove, 2013).

These core courses concentrated on essential skills that, in conjunction with everyday life skills, affected one's marketability and chances of success in the workforce (Donnor & Shockley, 2010). Both curriculum and instruction shaped expectations regarding the kinds of educational outcomes students should manifest by high school graduation (McDonnell, McLaughlin & Morison, 1997). This subject matter served as a guideline and template for project development in conjunction with activities and routines for observation and analysis, reflection, dialogue, critique, and negotiation (Riordan, 2013).

Over decades, schools revisited and revised the mentioned core curriculum to meet the needs of an ever-changing economy (Blacklock, 2009). Local state legislation provided and regulated what constituted graduation requirements for high school completion, such as the State of Washington (2013) which required all public high school students to meet statewide graduation requirements in order to earn a diploma. Their goal was to prepare students to meet 21st-century demands in their working and personal lives (State of Washington, 2013). The researcher experienced, in his role as a counselor, these types of plans placed students on a graduation path geared to university and college, trade school, admission into the military, and the career workforce.

Obtaining college admission, identification, and acceptance were examples of goals beyond high school to which many students aspired, and the attainment of which served as major achievements for most Americans (Osborne, 2006). For years, teachers and parents stressed to their children and students the inherent rewards of college and its potential to open the door leading to future success (Gira, 2012). However, the lack of support from peers, teachers, and most critically parents during a student's high school transition decreased the chances of college success for many students.

Based on the Michigan Department of Education (2002), decades of research revealed that when parents were involved students had higher grades, higher test scores, graduation rates increased, student attendance and motivation increased, along with a decrease in suspension rates, use of drugs and alcohol, and violent behavior. The factors mentioned in the study also played a role in determining if students would successfully make the transition from high school to college (Cuseo, 2013). Furthermore, Hines and Holcomb-McCoy (2011) found through their research on parenting styles and influential factors of student academics, that "individual-level predictors such as student effort, parent-child discussion and association with positive peers played a substantial role in increasing students' achievement" (p. 3).

The critical connection of relationships and academic success became important in the context of the present economy. "The competing tensions between market-driven behavior and the collective needs of the public in ensuring a quality education for all children obligate[d] education leaders to balance the needs of the citizen and the demands of the customer" (Fege, 2000, p. 41). This became an agenda for many agencies and institutions. The nationally recognized and substantive study, Jobs for the Future (JFF),

was a program that originated within 200 communities across 43 states with the sole purpose of increasing a student's pathway from high school to college, then to family in sustained careers ("Jobs for the Future", 2009, p. 1).

A study conducted by Jobs for the Future (2009) tracked 32,908 Texas high school students through 2011 for a total of six years after their 2004 graduation to gauge the effects of dual credit courses on college completion (p. 1). The researchers concluded that taking dual credit courses increased students' college graduation rates, regardless of ethnicity or socioeconomic status. This led to their proposal to state legislators seeking the expansion of dual-enrollment programs to benefit all students (Struhl & Vargas, 2012). Furthermore, JFF stressed the necessity of the importance of encouraging low-income and underrepresented students to enroll in college level courses ("Jobs for Future", 2009). The *Research Study of Texas Dual Credit Programs* suggested that an increase in enrollment among minorities could be accomplished with the benefit of considering and implementing basic practices. The implementation of strategies helped to increase student awareness of dual credit value and options, explain timelines, subsidies and course availability as well as address the more challenging tasks of "increasing student engagement, persistence and performance" (Friedman et al., 2011, p. 28). The combination of focused support and information at the high school level with strategic planning from counselors that targeted students' needs opened other doors to higher education. The researcher believes that dual credit courses and advanced placement (AP) courses created a familiarity and comfort level with the academic rigor that made college and university more accessible for African American males.

To this end, agencies and stakeholders such as Jobs for the Future and TRIO influenced state-set requirements and college preparatory courses, which in turn, directed students to post-secondary options such as college and career-readiness training. The Minnesota Department of Education (2013) highlighted preparation avenues specifically designed to meet the needs of college and career-readiness, such as Advanced Placement Courses (AP), defined as College Board Programs. These courses called for increased rigor and allowed the opportunity for students to gain college credit dependent upon an acceptable AP test score. In addition, Advance Placement courses were rationalized by allowing "Students to aspire to, apply to, and then enroll in college through a complex, longitudinal, interactive process involving individual aspiration and achievement, learning opportunities and intervention programs in high school, and institutional admissions" (McDonough, 2006, p. 5). In the researcher's experience it was this combination of rigor, support, and tangible results that functioned in coordination to stimulate students to take ownership of their academics as avenues towards personal success.

The College Level Examination Program (CLEP) structured around 34 accelerated computer-based exams allowed students to demonstrate skills needed in order to achieve college credit or pass introductory level courses (Center for School Change, 2013). Additionally, International Baccalaureate (IB) Training provided rigorous curriculum that consisted of four programs used in the development of students aged three to 19: intellectual, personal, social and emotional components with living, learning, and working globally were recognized by universities around the world (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2013).

Lastly, Dual Credit (DC) allowed student participation in college-level courses and completion of both high school and college credit (Boise State University, 2012). All of these programs promoted student participation in college-level course work, which provided rigor to increase the likelihood of attempting and completing a certification or college degree program (Plank, DeLuca, & Estacion, 2005).

Mathematical and scientific concepts and skills learned in math classes were used in many disciplines outside of these courses for advancement. For instance, participating students in advanced math courses were more likely to pursue and complete college than students who did not (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). Achieve, Inc's (2012) article, titled *State College and Career Ready High School Graduation Requirements*, promoted set core courses and essential graduation requirements, which in theory, high schools should have provided for the in-coming college freshmen in preparation to complete a four-year college or university, two-year community college, or trade school certification program successfully. In the researcher's experience, these essential courses satisfied the core curriculum standards, provided diversified, well-rounded exposure both academically and technically that resulted in each student becoming well-versed in the core competencies and marketable skills for a successful life after graduation. In addition to graduation universal core requirements, some states, such as the Tennessee Department of Education (2015), embraced new Academic and Career Technical Educational pathways as a means of adequately preparing students for college or career readiness for today's economy and job market.

In addition to core requirements, schools highly recommended extracurricular activity in order to improve student engagement, develop morale, and create a positive

school climate. Research revealed that after-school activities developed a focused motivation in students, and the feeling of efficacy carried over into their schoolwork (Lawhorn, 2008). Schools encouraged students to participate in one or more of these activities, due to the documented benefits they provided, which were not typically available in the traditional class setting. Kennedy (2008) noted that extracurricular "participation helps self-esteem, promotes team culture and self-image, all of which help students become engaged at the high school" (para. 8). In theory, students were able to interact freely and socially with peers, develop interpersonal social skills, explore hobbies and recreation, and remain active through physical education and activities, such as dance, martial arts, and track. While schools provided a wide variety of choice activities, these extracurricular offerings varied based on the student body or child's interest, likes, and dislikes (Holloway, 2002).

Engagement through cultural sensitivity, awareness, and appreciation for learning within a structured and supported classroom setting provided the required foundation for building a viable learning community. The research of Irving and Hudley (2008) revealed that young African American males who grew up with "economic resources and regular contact with people of a variety of ethnicities" had fewer negative outcomes and less opposition to the dominant culture (p. 682). Open discussions concerning discrimination and cultural difference versus educational reform for 'all' oftentimes generalized and did not address the fundamentals of the times' diverse student.

In the lives of various ethnic groups, common practices, daily struggles, and closely held perceptions were the way of life for people (Watkins & Terrell, 1988). One's culture or economic class often played an integral role in forming closely guarded values that

perhaps did not represent the commonly held beliefs of that culture. This often led to cultural mistrust and within the school setting could create an “inverse relationship with outcome expectations” (Irving & Hudley, 2008, p. 676). If this was the case for school faculty, the question of students’ perceptions related to motivation and academic performance emerged. The ideology of informality without cultural identity hindered students’ willingness to feel safe and created a culturally striped environment that did not accurately reflect reality (Irving & Hudley, 2008). Therefore, the researcher believed that educational establishments that championed and encouraged diverse cultural identity created a safe structure in which each student was accepted as an equal partner in their own education.

Research uncovered the vital importance of creating strong, supportive communities for African American males that bolstered their confidence in the learning environment and made them more comfortable with the transition to college (Owens, Lacey, Rawls, & Holbert-Quince, 2010). King (2008) posited that the educators’ hesitance to introduce race into education was viewed as a disinclination to discuss the uncomfortable aspects of culture. Jordan and Cooper (2003) attributed this reticence by educators to many factors. Citing Irvine in their research, Jordan and Cooper explored that among these factors fear that “their [the educators’] lack of knowledge of cultural heritage of their students’ peers, and their fears and anxieties that open consideration of differences might incite racial discord or perhaps upset a fragile, often unpredictable, racial harmony” (p. 26). This idea was further investigated in “First Generation African American Male College Students” in which Owens et al. (2010) outlined specific

practices that counselors could implement using the element of culture to build rapport and create a support structure designed for student success.

For years in the early 21st century, it was evident that academics, extracurricular, social, and character skills were instrumental to success after high school. Lleras (2008) suggested that African American and Hispanics who engaged in fine arts were able to draw upon learned social skills and behaviors acquired through those programs, suggesting a value beyond academics of the programs. Further, Lleras (2008) noted that students gained not only higher test scores, but also developed skills that were “rewarded by teachers in school and sought after and rewarded by employers in the labor market” (p. 900).

The need for an emerging workforce possessing a skill level, adequate for business needs, led to partnerships between business and education. The State of Illinois developed P-20 to meet just such an issue, with a committee appointed by the governor that consisted of, but was not limited to, business leaders, teachers, union leaders, faculty, school board members, college and university faculty representatives, state education, and workforce agencies (State of Illinois, 2012). The State of Illinois (2012) P-20 Council noted their goal was “to increase the proportion of adults in Illinois with high quality degrees and credentials to 60% by the year 2025” (para. 1). The objective was to maximize student educational achievement within the curriculum, create opportunities for success in the workforce, and generate ways for students to contribute to their local communities. The interactive play and hands-on elements of the emergent curriculum was concentrated at lower developmental levels where student disinterest and apathy usually arose, and evolved into “project-based learning activities, in cooperation with

their teachers" (Brand, Valent, & Browning, 2013, p. 3). However, during 10th through 12th grade, students were encouraged to conduct research and explore possible careers, colleges, and schools of interest, without the intention that the decision of career pathway to be final. The schools expected that the experience itself would allow students to explore various avenues and that exploration would motivate students by allowing them to see what they could become and what the distinct pathways were towards that goal. They found that this aspiration and ownership of a goal became an integral part of the motivation for students to succeed academically (Brand et al., 2013).

The next stumbling block came with college readiness. In the exploration stage of transition, students of high socioeconomic status often received vital information and knowledge about admission procedures, attendance costs, books, fees, deadlines, and enjoyed the benefits of parental involvement due to their parents' experiences as college graduates; their parents' familiarity with the college enrollment process, their abilities to access the resources, and the opportunity and foresight of college planning through a college saving fund (Hossler, Schmidt & Vesper, 1999). This vital issue of parental involvement in relationship to academic decision-making was cause for concern with regard to the academic achievement of the African American male (Hines & Holcomb-McCoy, 2011). However, Hines and Holcomb-McCoy (2011) noted that though the father's influence was a predictor of a strong positive outcome, counselors could also coordinate with their local community to create a climate that provided role models and mentors, as well as establish opportunities to include African American fathers in understanding the "resources, networks and norms of school" (p. 75).

During the 11th grade, Dervarics' (2006) noted that students refined and narrowed their ideas regarding college selection after high school, and this juncture became critically important when college or university tuition attendance costs became red flags and real areas of concern for minority students. At this point, lack of positive social and cultural influences became a detriment to many minority students, and many abandoned the pursuit of higher education. However, if a strong mentor, teacher, parent, or community leader was absent to provide answers, motivation, and education in the college process, many African American male students abandoned the possibility of a college education and dropped out (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001). The uncertain waters of college admission and student loans proved far too difficult for many first generation college males to navigate on their own. Hence, that opportunity was lost during their senior year, when students finalized their selection process (Noguera, 2001).

During the final phase of high school, Grade Point Average (GPA), standardized test scores, and possible funding options became a defining factor in the selection process. Of all of these issues, funding played the most crucial role in the decision-making process for African American males (Noguera, 2001). A student's senior year included decisions on college "costs and financial aid played a dramatic role in the college choices of low-SES students, as well as African Americans and Latinos, all of whom tend[ed] to be highly sensitive to tuition and financial aid levels" (Heller, 1999, p. 8). Although, financial aid provided hope to many minority and low-income students, they were fearful of the rigorous Federal Application for Student Financial Aid (FAFSA) (Berkner, Chavez, & Carroll, 1997). The FAFSA relied on parental input of lower socioeconomic groups, who may have lacked an understanding of how to complete and

submit the rather lengthy and involved financial form (Perna, 2008). In the researcher's experience these parents often gave up, which resulted in college becoming a lost dream, for their children.

Despite these manifold challenges, schools attempted to prepare students for higher education and utilized standardized assessments such as the Explorer, ACT, and SAT to measure skills students acquired during high school. Across America, schools were employing standardized tests as major indicators for academic success ("SATs Poor Measure of Overall H.S. Population," 2010). To measure mastery of content, according to national standards in areas of math, science, English and reading, students had to meet target scores in testing, gain admission to college, scholarships, and financial aid (Berkner et al., 1997). In preparation for this, schools employed assessments to evaluate a student's likelihood for success after high school, which served as scientific predictors for determining whether students would be suitable for a college or university. ACT scores and high school averages were slightly more accurate for predicting first-year success of African American students than of Caucasian American students (Hoffman & Lowitzki, 2005). The opposite result was true for Hispanic students. Moreover, smaller percentages of African American and Hispanic students than Caucasian American students achieved most benchmark values of high school average, ACT Composite score, or a predictive index based on ACT Composite score and high school average jointly (Noble, 2003, p. 28).

Researchers noted that African American male students desired higher education just as much as whites, but African American students were accepted into college at much lower rates; as only 47% graduated from high school with their cohorts in 2008

(Harper & Davis, 2012, p. 104). Therefore, if standardized assessments, such as the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), were designed to measure how much of the core curriculum students actually retained, then much of what was being taught was not speaking to the needs of this demographic (Hall, Gagnon, Thompson, Schneider & Marion, 2014). Although, the researcher believed that curriculum designed around the assessment was not a reflection of true learning, it was important to understand that if teachers geared lessons around a specific focus of core material such as benchmarks; that benchmark to review the data added meaning and relevance within a cultural framework and resulted in an increase in student motivation. Brooks (2004) noted that if "teachers do not have meaning making at the core of the pedagogy and practice, then let's not call the activity teaching" (p. 8).

For students to be ready for today's workforce, students should develop the fundamental skills previously mentioned and a number of secondary skills during their high school tenure. These skills reflected mastery of the general academic skills in the standard core curriculum areas of math, reading, social studies, and science (Green, 2001). However, the traits of social maturity, character-building, financial literacy, and setting goals also proved key ingredients to the skills needed in the workplace (Plank et al., 2005). These proficiencies in areas that defined standardized assessment were considered examples of career path preparation skills that simply provided supports to prepare high school students for the times' global economy and the world job market (Berkner et al., 1997). However, they were viewed as highly prized assets to employers, equal to the necessity of content area knowledge. Based upon career path choices, the

skills of teambuilding, cooperation, and critical thinking were viewed by employers as tangible assets just as important as the knowledge of physics (Donnor & Shockley, 2010).

In order to prepare students for college or a career, schools implemented career preparation programs to help students begin choosing career paths. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2007), at the time of writing there were roughly 47% of the nation's schools, or 7,400 high schools, that offered one or more Tech Prep programs (p. 1). In addition, nearly every community college or technical college participated in a bridge program or affiliate relationship with their local high schools to offer educational benefits for those students who completed high school tech programs (Janger, Strauss & Campbell, 2013). One example, Durham Public School District in Durham, NC, offered a variety of career interest pathways for their comprehensive high schools. Some of the pathways were business technology, culinary arts, and early childhood, and other CTE courses were computer engineering II, E-commerce, and medical science (Hill, 2011). Students who selected a career pathway of interest also were required to take four courses in that area of study, not to mention honors and AP courses (Janger et al, 2013). Statistically, minority students would take AP courses in technology and computer science before they would select those classes for core curriculum. However, enrollment in dual credit coursework that focused on career and technical education and computer training showed higher enrollment rates than core curriculum classes (Friedman et al., 2011). For these students, the establishment of their own cultural identity with the framework of academic success was critical to their later choices towards continuing their education. Within the context of the evolving job market of the 21st century, students "must be prepared to continuously learn and be innovative to stay competitive in a highly

connected international marketplace and to help create new types of jobs that do not yet exist" (Association for Career and Technical Education [ACTE], 2006, p. 8). Therefore, in the researcher's opinion, Durham schools created a relevant connection between education and the workforce that showed students value through the coursework.

In addition to career preparatory programs, some schools in America promoted excellence in education by stressing the importance of influential supports for overall students' development. Some of these educational support opportunities involved school, community, and parental and mentor supports (Sue & Sue, 2003). These types of supports played a role as important as the curriculum, and the effect of those programs could influence students' academic performance (Sue & Sue, 2003).

In a discussion of holistic educational development, Martin (2002) asserted that students learned better when engaged in experiential learning, stating that the 'doing' added meaning to the content. Martin (2002) noted as well that effective learning called for collective responsibility; everyone involved in the learning process took ownership of the end goal. Thomas, Carswell, Price, and Petre (1998) reported that holistic development benefitted the student most if everyone involved took responsibility for student success. In other words, if parents, schools, and community were all active in a student's life, with coordinated efforts towards common goals, then students would benefit from essential skills for academic success (Thomas et al., 1998). This cooperation achieved the most meaningful result when students were able to produce, demonstrate, perform, and engage intellectually within the process (Kennedy, 2008).

When reviewing the literature on successful schools that demonstrated effective student engagement, it became clear to the researcher that motivating students to adapt to

school culture proved to be a key ingredient in student success (Kennedy, 2008). However, it was also important to help them develop academically and socially, thus producing a well-rounded and capable individual who possessed the skills necessary to navigate both the social and technical intricacies of the workplace of the time (Kennedy, 2008). In reference to student motivation, schools evaluated the student's level of activity, participation, and adaptation of school values and norms; all signs of student engagement (King, 2008). Students in the study actively engaged in many independent tasks that were not school-related, but called on them to read and critically assess literature from many different sources (King, 2008). Taking into account popular habits of youth, the strategy of embedding curriculum in media that was already familiar generated engagement based on familiarity. This change in dynamics created a bridge that lent relevancy to the curriculum inside of a more structured approach and "improve[ed] the student's experience" (Backer, 2010, p. 19). This enjoyment tied to their social media culture, made participation more enjoyable, and the students were more willing to complete tasks. This shift in the paradigm of instruction could improve levels of literacy (Irvin, Meltzer & Dukes, 2007).

The motivation for students to read and write outside of school seemed to be threefold:

> (1) the topic needed to be something they feel was important to communicate about; (2) the topic needed to be something they felt strongly about or are interested in; or (3) the reading or writing needed to take place when they wanted to do it, or just in time. (Irvin et al., 2007, para. 4)

These writing opportunities also became wonderful forums in which to explore the dynamic conversations of student culture, school culture and tie those back thematically into the literature being assessed (Deshler, 2005).

Schools were also focused on engagement practices as an attempt to improve school culture and increase student motivation to succeed holistically and academically. Students, staff, teachers, and administration adopted and promoted culture, norms, and policies that established the climate of the school environment, not just in the school, but also in the surrounding community (Irvin et al., 2007). When schools extended the culture into the community, the result was often an improvement in students' achievement on standardized test scores, community involvement, a higher percentage of graduates, improved attendance, and a decrease in disciplinary problems (Irvin et al., 2007).

The continuity created a structure that students often felt was 'safe', and one that they could trust by virtue of its familiarity (Irving & Hudley, 2008). However, one of the obstacles schools faced was curriculum overload. This very real issue resulted in academic failure for some students. At the time of this writing, many teachers, in the experience of the researcher, particularly within math classes, worked diligently to meet state standards at the expense of quality education that would lead to college and career success. Many schools expected students to learn, to be able to work from memorized formulas and not just the instructors' materials; but they also expected them to keep up with the lesson plans, complete required assignments, and learn the instructors' teaching style and unique classroom requirements (Stronge, Richard, & Catano, 2008). Successfully doing this would guarantee success in the class. However, because this did

not address the root of the issue, many students were still failing and being required to repeat courses (Donnor & Shockley, 2010). Furthermore, Donnor and Shockley (2010) argued that standardized "testing does not align with the necessary skills and competencies needed" (p. 6) to compete in the new workforce. These same authors further contended that these skills were outdated and reflected more accurately the need of the last century rather than addressing the needs of their present century.

Schools addressed these issues in a number of ways. They identified the needs of the students though data analysis by cataloging and assessing the data through test scores, surveys, etc. (Stronge et al., 2008). Teachers were meeting regularly to review this data in professional learning groups, to view representative student samples, and to converse and collaborate. Schools provided more targeted staff development; that allowed for consistency among disciplines, repetition of directions that provided a universal expectation framework from classroom to classroom, and offered feedback throughout the process to the teachers and staff (Stronge et al., 2008). Schools employed observations and evaluations to ensure quality instruction across content areas that provided both the teacher and leader with ongoing feedback and opportunities to grow professionally (Shellard, 2005).

In addition to this, administrators and teachers were developing short-term targets with teachers. Consequently, schools were abandoning activity-centered programs consisting of fun and energetic activities that had no bottom-line effect on students' overall performance or improvements (Fashola & Slavin, 1998). In many cases these types of activities were called "rain dancing", which was the pursuit of activities that sound, look, and make you feel good, but lack in overall performance (Schmoker, 2000 p.

39). Therefore, only those activities that improved a student's overall performance, according to data, were generally implemented or deemed useable materials in planning overall curriculum (Schmoker, 2000). In addition to the instructional aspect of education, the study found that a feeling of connectedness and closeness "to people at school, positively correlate[d] with grade point average in major school subjects. A sense of community in school was associated with positive attitudes toward school academic motivation and engagement" (California Department of Education, 2005, p. 45). Furthermore, cultural trust and the feeling of having a buffer within the academic setting resulted in an academic climate that was more positive among African American male students (Irving & Hudley, 2008).

Overall, throughout the available literature the researcher found many schools were geared specifically towards improving the academic performance of students and preparing them for college and careers (Donaldson, Hinton, & Nelson, 1999). The question this study addressed related to how public high school institutions were effectively preparing their African American male students for successful lives after graduation.

Problem

In 2000, there were 791,600 Black men in jail or prison and 603,032 enrolled in colleges or universities (Darling-Hammond, 2007b, p. 318). Representations of such studies showed low numbers of African Americans pursing a higher education degree and high numbers of barriers amongst African American male populations (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, n.d.). The researcher believed that such figures supported misleading images portrayed in media at the time, and acted as a

basis for stereotypes targeting African American males. In relation to low employment for African American males in the job market, there was also a low representation of successful role models, which was exacerbated by negative social, environmental factors, and negative stereotypes that hindered the motivation of young African American male student (Tyler, Stevens, & Uqdah, 2009).

Data from the studies of consequences of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act revealed that African Americans, specifically males, suffered from a disconnection with the academic system that resulted in a failure of the system to address their academic needs (Bell & Meinelt, 2011). Therefore, the skills that would foster social mobility and economic achievement were not being cultivated (African American Male Education Network and Development [AAMEND], 2008). Although this phenomenon was not new, it continued to be a persistent problem not yet resolved (California Tomorrow, n.d). African American males' low performance in the crucial areas of education and employment stood as systemic; a societal problem emphasized by the high numbers of African American males incarcerated, high numbers of African American males who did not complete high school, and low representation in successful careers (AAMEND, 2008).

Research that highlighted the African American Male Summit demonstrated the failure of the public school structure to meet the unique academic needs of the African American male. The purpose of this study was to examine the high academic performance of minority males in one of the most academically successful high schools in the state at the time of the study's inception, Jack E. Singley Academy in Irving, TX. Given the success this school experienced with African American males, the researcher

believed it was important to investigate how this high school was effectively preparing its African American male students related to academic success. The results of this study may assist with finding new educational strategies, provide support for future research, and aid in focusing programs in various school systems across the U.S. that aid the success of African American male adolescent learners.

Importance of the Study

The 2008-2009 recession drastically affected the U.S. job market. In 2008, 15.4% of the U.S. population of African American males were unemployed and over one-third of young Black men ages 16 to 19 in the labor market were unemployed (Cawthorne, 2009, p. 2). As of March 2010, there were 19% of the U.S. African American males still unemployed (Bauer, 2010, para. 4). Interpreting this percentage as a common recurrence, the researcher concluded that African American males were underrepresented in the job market and there began a push for people to change careers due to their unemployment, limited labor, skilled-focus jobs were needed, and more education was required to maintain the status quo in a stressed economy.

There were numerous studies regarding low African American male representation in higher education and attendance in four-year universities, community college, and vocational educational programs. According to the 2005 Census Bureau’s statistics, the male African-American population of the U.S. aged between 18 and 24 numbered 1,896,000 (Louisiana, 2007, p. 5). According to the same census data, 530,000 of these African-American males, or 28%, were enrolled in colleges or universities (including two-year-colleges) in 2005 (Park, Mulye, Adams, Brindis & Irwin, 2006, p. 309). The rising demand of skilled certificates and higher education degrees required for

many careers forced the need of additional education to meet the requirements of the job market. People relied on public schools to render fundamental methods for individual career readiness or offer the basic necessities for graduates to be ready for college or careers of choice (Park et al., 2006). In general, schools were failing to prepare many African American high school students for life after high school. The researcher concluded that it was important that this research investigate secondary institutions that were excelling in their preparation of African American male students for college and careers.

Design of the Study

The researcher conducted an ethnographic inquiry to explore the school culture, as well as the strategies and processes that Jack E. Singley Academy exercised to ensure the success of African American male students. As a high school counselor, the researcher worked with African American male students, many of whom were not experiencing academic success. A large percentage of these were not motivated to take advantage of advanced academic offerings in the regular high school program.

According to *U.S. News and World Report,* Jack E. Singley Academy was described as a Career Technology Education School which served a predominantly minority population (“Jack E. Singley Academy”, 2015). The school served a predominantly minority population and showed considerable academic success. The researcher decided to conduct an ethnographic inquiry as the best means to uncover successful educational practices for the male, specifically the African American male population.

The purpose of this study was to examine the high academic performance of minority males in a recognized successful high school, Jack E. Singley Academy in Irving, TX. Given the success this school experienced with African American males, the researcher believed it was important to investigate how this high school was effectively preparing its African American male students for academic success.

Research Questions

(1) What was the culture and attitude toward education at Jack E Singley High School and how did it contribute to the success of its students overall?

(2) Why did the culture of this school work so well?

(3) What did it mean to be successful in this school?

(4) How did this school culture interact with African American culture?

(5) How were African American male students engaged at this school?

(6) How and why were young African American male students in this school successful?

(7) Why was this high school successful with its African American male students?

Limitations of Study

This study was limited in its generalization, since the population of male African American students under study were from one Texas high school whose students were academically successful. Even with this defined population, there most likely were school districts in which these generalizations may not hold true (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). The study was limited to ninth though twelfth graders, however 12th graders were the only grade level that participated in the completion of the survey. The sample population was randomly selected by race and potential participants were then asked to participate

voluntarily. The students chosen as participants were attending the school from 2012 to 2013.

The researcher was employed at the study site and had non-supervisory relationships with the participants. This could have introduced unintentional bias into responses from participants and into interpretation of responses by the researcher.

Delimitations of Study

This study was be restricted to student participants enrolled at the Jack E. Singley Academy in Irving, Texas. Employing a qualitative approach, the study interpreted narrative data from interviews in response to research questions (Creswell, 2002). Research questions sought data from personal interviews of each participant, generated further insight into the overall success of the participants, and offered explanations for the academic success of this group of minority African American male students. This study did not measure the quantitative degree of academic success. Academic progress and past performance indicators were not addressed in this study.

Definition of Terms

Assessments. For the purpose of this study, a combination of informal and formal testing measures to verify learned curricula and/or applied material. In addition, assessments act as feedback to promote future learning.

Career readiness preparation. A State's college- and career-ready standards must be either (1) standards that are common to a significant number of States; or (2) standards that are approved by a State network of institutions of higher education, which must certify that students who meet the standards will not need remedial course work at the postsecondary level. (U.S. Department of Education, n.d., para. 3)

Curriculum. Effective course of study that promotes student engagement and motivation through application of practical educational theories (Ebert, Ebert, & Bentley, 2013).

Data. Information in qualitative research that takes the form of words or visual images. The descriptive properties of the words, quotes, or further illustrations of meaning substantiate the findings aided by the informants' meanings (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982).

Engagement. Marzano defined engagement as those activities that engage the student for both the short term and the long term with the effect of garnering motivation, interest, effort, and participation (Marzano, Pickering & Heflebower, 2011).

Ethnography. The study of the description of an ethnic group as a branch of anthropoid studies, which are usually non-theoretically driven, cross-cultural research, which entails a thorough discussion of the variables and measures being used in the study (Munck, 2000).

Grade point average. Grade Point Average (GPA) is a reference to students' grades earned in courses throughout the student's four years of high school, which are based on a four point standard scale; A=4, B=3, C=2, D=1, F=0 (Patterson & Mattern, 2011).

Higher educational program. Education beyond the secondary level that is generally provided by a college or university (Struhl, & Vargas, 2012).

High school. For the purpose of this study, High School refers to a school that offers academic instruction to students ranging in ages from 13 to 18, and comprising grade levels Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, and Senior.

Instructional practices. The application of effective and engaged curriculum (Marzano et al., 2011).

School culture. Students' perceptions of the educational atmosphere that creates a culture of inclusion, assisting them in their academic success while recognizing their ethnicity, background, and unique values (Irving & Hudley, 2008).

Standardized testing. Tests constructed on state standards that are employed as distal measures and rooted in the curriculum or testing of curricular concepts within a new context (Ruiz-Primo, Shavelson, Hamilton & Klein, 2002).

Student achievement. For the purpose of this study, the quantifiable and qualitative results based on academic data from GPA and standardized testing, as well as ACT and/or SAT. The qualitative data is based on AP class enrollment and completion subject to student participation and student and staff perception of success through individual and group interviews.

Student success(es). For the purpose of this study, student success comprised holistic achievements in the areas of academic progress and benchmarks, social enrichment, engaged behaviors demonstrated, and positive feedback from parents, student, and teacher.

Test. The application of learned material that reflects assessments, assignments, and class curriculum (Mitchell, 2008).

Summary

In summary, this ethnographic study was designed to analyze successful educational practices to promote African American male career readiness through engagement in academic culture that supported learning. In addition, this research

examined this target population to ascertain how Jack E. Singley Academy achieved academic success with that population. At the time of this study, thousands of African American males, such as those in Texas, were experiencing low representation in college completion, vocational programs, and in the job market, while comprising high numbers of high school dropouts and incarcerations (Butterfield, 2002; Few, 2008). However, one Texas school in particular exhibited effective outcomes, with an ability to engage the African American male population; this study explored Jack E. Singley Academy's educational effectiveness. Chapter Two includes a review of literature comprising background information on the challenges faced by the African American male population of high school students, regarding academics and the academic framework of collaborative learning that supported academic success in this population. Chapter Three explores the methodology used in this ethnographic study and the design used by the researcher. The findings are discussed in Chapter Four of the study. The results are discussed, with recommendations for future study explored in Chapter Five in both the context of Jack E. Singley Academy and the greater ramifications for the education of African American males nationwide.

Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to determine how active engagement of African American male students in the learning process prepared them for academic success. Examining a nationally state-recognized high school, Jack E. Singley Academy in Irving, TX, revealed a large population of minority males. Given the success this school had experienced with minorities, the researcher sought to understand how this high school was effectively preparing its African American male students for academic success. The results of this study were intended to demonstrate the effectiveness of specific educational practices that assisted learners in their achievement of academic success and promoted their continued motivation to succeed. This study focused on understanding the effectiveness of these educational strategies and programs as they related to the success of this marginalized population of learners.

Background

In the 2008 Census, it was reported that approximately 17,208,000 American students attended public high school (Davis & Bauman, 2008, p. 2). Of those reported, African American students comprised 15% of the student population (Davis & Bauman, p. 2). Of that percentage, there were 2,478 African American students enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs (Davis & Bauman, p. 3). Unemployment among African American men stood at 18%, and among young African American men without a high-school diploma, the unemployment rate was over 50% ("Black unemployment: Not so colour-blind", 2009, p. 1). These numbers lack those in prison, comprising five times the number of African Americans behind bars as Caucasians. In order to prepare students

for the workforce, public school districts were commissioned with aligning their curricula to assure academic success at the high school level for all students. Although there were decreasing number of African American males represented in higher educational programs, there was an increase in the number of African American male high school dropouts and incarcerations. The Bureau of Justice Statistics (2008) cited that in 2007 there were 4,618 African American male sentenced prisoners per 100,000 African American males in the U.S., compared to 1,747 Hispanic male sentenced prisoners per 100,000 Hispanic males and 773 white male sentenced prisoners per 100,000 white males. Historically, African American male representation in higher education had been underrepresented (West & Sabol, 2009, p. 18). In 1970, less than 5% of the U.S. total population was comprised of African American males who attained a higher education (U.S. Census Bureau, 1970, p. 151). During the years from 1977-2007, African American men showed a 109% increase in college degree attainment (Harper & Davis, 2012, p. 105). However, this number was considerably lower than other minority ethnicities and their female counterparts (Harper & Davis, 2012). Of those few African American males who entered college, only 22% actually graduated (Jackson, 2007, p. 1). A report by *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (2005) stated that in 2004, there were 758,400 African American males enrolled in higher education compared to 603,032 in 2000. This 26% increase was the highest level of enrollments for African American males in history at a historic 4.4% of total student enrollment in higher education (Cuyjet, 2006, p. 8).

With an overall increase of African American males enrolled in higher education, there remained a low representation in comparison to the total U.S. population. Butterfield (2002) cited a significant decrease in the African American male

representation in higher education programs, while concurrently detailing an influx of African American males entering prison. In details from a report prepared by the Justice Policy Institute, Cuyjet (2006) noted that in 2000 there were 791,600 Black men in jail or prison and 603,032 enrolled a higher educational program in the U.S. Conversely, the report found that in 1980, there were 143,000 Black men in jail or prison and 463,700 enrolled in colleges or universities (p. 8).

Majors (2005) maintained that African American students tended to view education as a system controlled by Whites, and were intensely mindful of the reality that the job market did not promote their efforts, and they saw a diminished return on their academic investment. Arguing that the intersection of these concepts resulted in the selective devaluation of academics, Majors contended that this left African American students with no compelling reason to expend an effort to achieve academically. According to Majors, African American males did not begin their school careers with this mindset, but adopted this conviction at some point within their academic career. In 2006 the average income of an African American male 25 years of age and old non-graduate was $22,151 (Webster & Bishaw, 2007 p. 16). The reality of a steady paycheck for many low-income African American males became the primary motivator to discontinue their educational opportunities and pursue a position in the work force (Majors, 2005).

Conversely, many Black females took advantage of the immediate years after high school and pursued higher education, resulting in the educational inequality between African American males and females. Research on educational inequality focused on the gender-related trends in women’s and men’s college achievements that suggested young men were falling behind young women in their educational pursuits (Anderson & Hearn,

1992). In 1994, enrollment by African American males in college exceeded that of their female counterparts (Anderson & Hearn, 1992). A reversal of that trend appeared in 2012 as men's enrollment stalled and the enrollment of African American women increased to 69%, creating a 12% gap between the two genders (Lopez & Barrera, 2014, para. 4).

There was a growing concern that adolescent boys were neglected or faced unique cultural challenges in today's families, schools, and communities. The Schott Foundation for Public Education (2004) cited the statistic that roughly 70 % of ninth grade African American males were not expected to graduate with their cohort (p. 7). These numbers were notable, but many school districts lacked the longitudinal data to adequately measure the true graduation rates, as mandated by NCLB (Watson & Brown, 2010). Retention of African American male students called for culturally relevant pedagogy that incorporated the tenets of masterful teaching and required considerably more focus and dialogue than the more popular attention to standards-based testing and similar assessments. The national failure to address the educational needs of this minority population required a critical reassessment of the problem (Perry, Turner, & Meyer, 2006). The literature reviewed offered insight into the statistical data, explored the results of previous studies to provide insight to best practices for implementing projects that contributed to the academic success of African American students, and examined the role of active engagement as a critical factor in student motivation and achievement. It was the researcher's opinion that combining the supports and structures delineated herein might positively influence the quality of service educators rendered to their students. Student engagement, motivation, and learning relied on multiple components. Research found that school climate, the attitudes and convictions of staff, and the support of family

and society through a value system that validated the value of education led to an enhancement of student motivation (Perry et al., 2006). The sections below provide an overview of the issues created by NCLB and introduces various strategies proven to positively affect student engagement, motivation, and learning.

No Child Left Behind

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) was conceived to achieve equitable educational opportunities to hold schools accountable for closing the achievement gap between students of different ethnicities and backgrounds (Lee, 2006). The mandate relied on high-stakes testing that would level the playing field by 2014, reaching 100% Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) across the nation (Lee, 2006). This government-established, state-enforced reform was designed to function as an accountability measure for public schools to provide meaningful education while meeting state standards (Lee, 2006). The bipartisan agreement was founded upon the premise that substantial increases in federal aid, coupled with stringent accountability measures, would result in sizeable educational gains across ethnicities and economic backgrounds (Lee, 2006). Under this reform, schools were challenged to reframe curriculum and develop new, more effective instructional practices intended to raise their standards to meet the goal for improvement towards AYP. Failure to meet yearly progressions would result in sanctions after the second year. However, Lee’s (2006) detailed analysis of the data found that the statistics on the closing of the math and reading gap for minorities, which was framed as a critical goal for the program, showed no measureable shift from the numbers recorded before the enactment of NCLB.

Educators, as well, raised concerns about the detrimental effects of the high-

stakes testing, the effects of sanctions for failure to meet AYP, the stigma that schools suffered, and loss of support under the 'failing' label, and the recurring focus placed on racial and economic stratification within districts and schools with regards to testing (Sunderman, Kim, & Orfield, 2005). Further studies conducted by Rice University in Houston determined that the standardized assessments required by NCLB contributed to a higher dropout rate among low-income students (Breaden, 2008). The 2010-2011 school year ended with the highest percentage of failing schools since the implementation of NCLB, with an estimated 48% of schools failing to make AYP (Scott, 2011, p. 1). This was an increase over the previous year, which was 39%, and was the highest percentage of 'failing' schools reported since NCLB's implementation. At the time of this Scott's (2011) writings, scheduled reauthorization of NCLB was set to occur in 2014 (p. 1).

In 2007, Congress approved a five-year funding of the NCLB program at a cost of $28.9 billion for fiscal year 2007 with an additional 40 programs approved at set amounts that increased as necessary for the years following (Harris, 2011, p. 38). With a freeze on the funding, as it stood for the 40 programs, the total output of federal funding for NCLB stood at $39.4 billion for fiscal year 2007 (Harris, 2011, p. 38). Perhaps the most disquieting aspect unearthed in the available research lay in the statistical fact that some, as yet undefined, paradigm produced circumstances adverse to education for African American males, to the extent that billions in federal funds could not serve to reverse the yearly statistic by any significant amount over the course of ten years. In fact, measures packaged in NCLB conceived to ameliorate those statistics resulted in a growth pattern of academic success that was the same as before enacting NCLB (Lee, 2006). While the

federal government tinkered with resuscitating a failed system, studies revealed that the 21st century workplace had evolved. Donnor and Shockley (2010) contended that the misalignment of standardized testing with the requirements of the proficiencies of the 21st century rendered it useless as a measure of preparedness of students for the demands of the workplace. This study, in particular, called for policymakers and education stakeholders to construct educational frameworks that addressed class size, classroom and school culture, equitable expectations, and experienced professionals who could affect change (Donnor & Shockley, 2010).

The Importance of Student Engagement

Learning began on the level of the individual's perception, and Marzano's (2001) taxonomy identified the mental processing that occurred during learning across six levels: self-system thinking, metacognition, knowledge utilization, analysis, comprehension, and retrieval. Marzano's (2001) theory was relevant within the framework of minority education, as it highlighted the importance of key aspects repeatedly flagged as trouble areas in the education of African American males. Marzano's (2001) construct for learning encompassed the specific issues addressed in this literature review of relevance of the learning, student engagement, belief in the value of the curriculum to the student, and the importance of peer and social interaction within the academic setting, as components in student academic achievement. Marzano's (2001) research identified the importance of student engagement in creating an academic climate in which students flourished within a collaborative learning environment that was directed towards imbedding the principles through a structured, interactive approach (Marzano, 2001).

Engagement was identified as a strong predictor of academic outcome and served

as a key component of Marzano's (1998) taxonomy (Clark, Dufrene, Mercer, & Zeigler-Hill, 2012; Marzano, 1998). Citing engagement as the most critical aspect of the learning process, Marzano (1998) explained that the choice of engagement was the first door through which the student must pass for relevant learning to take place, positing that minus a personal 'buy in', the subsequent structural framework of the classroom was useless. Harper and Davis (2012) indicated that a social and academic disengagement among African American males occurred at an early age and was responsible in part for the low rate of high school completion of these students. Harper and Davis' (2012) study found that this disconnection from the system generally occurred between fourth and sixth grade and linked in part to a lack of same-race male role models within the academic setting. The study also contended that the dearth of teachers and mentors created a disengagement, as African American male students saw little or no place for themselves in this academic arena (Hilliard, 1997). The study also suggested that, at the point of resistance to academics, a devaluation of the importance of the educational system occurred. Academic excellence became an attainment more appropriate for Whites, and participating in a system from which they saw no return became a less attractive option (Harper & Davis, 2012). Hilliard (1997) postulated that it was this cultural incongruity along with a belief that the teachers really did not care that resulted in so many of the ubiquitous challenges within education. Hilliard (2000) advocated that the composition of public schools was one of a "structured mis-education" that was nonresponsive to the African American culture (p. 6). The study conducted by Irving and Hudley (2008) found a similar distrust of the public school system among African American males, particularly when they encountered a system that was under-funded and

staffed by teachers unprepared to meet the specific academic needs of the demographic which they served.

The significance of student engagement cannot be underestimated. When teaching with meaning and understanding occurred within the classroom, students became capable of developing meaning and gained understanding of the curriculum (Marzano, 2001). Students were able to link this new information with their then-current knowledge, related concrete information on the basis of principles they had mastered, and then explored essential questions, applying their learning in new contexts (McTighe, Seif, & Wiggins, 2012). McTighe et al. (2012) determined that student engagement served as the access point for learning, leaving an open field for addressing the core issues of motivation, academic identification through collaborative learning, relevant curriculum, and effective strategies for cultural identification.

Motivation and the Self-System

Marzano's (1998) investigation of what he termed the 'self-system' was comprised of the five basic categories that constituted the entirety of a person's belief system; these core beliefs were described as beliefs about the self (self-attributes), the view of self and others, understanding of the nature of the world, efficacy, and purpose. The relevance to the available literature lay in the fact that, incorporated within this belief system regarding self-concept, the drive for acceptance, the need for a neutral or friendly environment, situational efficacy, and purpose comprised many of the challenges faced by the African American male demographic within the public school framework. Marzano et al. (2011) maintained that students engaged based on emotions, interest, perceived importance, and perceived efficacy. Inherent in the self-system was the view of

self as a learner. Mills (1995) explored the need to educate students in developing new views of themselves as learners, releasing students from ingrained misconceptions that hampered their motivation to learn.

Tied into the element of motivation was perceived value of tasks; second only to engagement, this element was critical to the learner's success. At the time of this writing, research and theory on motivation (McCombs 1984; 1987; Schunk, 1990) indicated that learners were most motivated when they believed the tasks they were involved in were relevant to their personal goals. Powers (1973) hypothesized that human beings operated from a hierarchical structure of needs and goals: they must satisfy basic physical needs (e.g., food, shelter) and psychological needs (e.g., acceptance, safety) before being able to form goals to decide what they were working to accomplish. From this perspective, working to develop positive mental climate, as discussed in the previous section, focused on meeting students' psychological needs. A growing body of research indicated that when students were working on goals they had set for themselves, they were more motivated and efficient, and they achieved more than they did when working to meet goals set by the teacher (Schunk, 1991). This research stated that if educators expected students to be motivated to succeed at classroom tasks, they must somehow link those tasks to student goals. Some powerful ways noted by the authors included permitting students to structure tasks around their interests, allowing students to control specific aspects of tasks, and tapping students' natural curiosity (Schunk, 1991).

The Role of Cooperative Learning

The prominence in classrooms of domain-specific knowledge, particularly factual knowledge, led to a class atmosphere of teacher-led instruction that crippled the critical

thinking and independence of the learner (Biggs, 1999). Continuing research produced effective practices that were notable and accepted nationally by public and private schools as having created engaging and effective learning environments for minority students. The first and perhaps most fundamental aspect of learning defined by Marzano (1998) addressed the perception of the student towards the learning process. In one study, Silver and Marshall (1990) examined student attitudes as a factor in performance, concluding that those students who viewed themselves as poor problem solvers created perceptions that reduced natural ability and prior learning. Therefore, a new and much broader vision for the goal of minority education would also have addressed the attitudes, perceptions, and conceptual patterns required of a self-directed learner, framing both content and approach to content (Marzano, 2001). Redesigning the approach to education could lead to an enriched value of the curriculum, and a reduction of the related issues of alienation and dis-identification (McCombs, 2003).

Wasik and Slavin (1993) confirmed the positive effects of cooperative learning in promoting acceptance and support among group members. Research identified three fundamental methods in which students related with one another. Students participated with the goal of determining ranking, worked independently with no concern for other students or their progress, or collaborated to support both their learning and the learning of other students (Johnson & Johnson, & Stanne, 2000). The perception of school as a field of competition was the prevalent concept at work in the U.S. (Johnson et al., 2000). Cooperation and support among students who worked collaboratively outside the constraints of gender, ethnicity, and academic labels were listed as a singular classroom dynamic. The key elements of group learning explored by Johnson, Johnson, Holubec,

and Roy (1984) stressed the importance of accountability for each student, while it reinforced the need for positive group interactions as a learning tool. Additionally, it was noted that assigning jobs within a group created increased interdependence, facilitated interaction among a diverse group of students, and increased the rate and probability of acceptance among the group members (Slavin & Karweit, 1984). From the research reviewed by the researcher, the integration of cooperative learning as a framework upon which to build a better and more successful academic learning environment for the African American male became clear. The development of skillful thinkers with the mental habits of self-directed discovery, the capacity to engage in positive group interaction and apply solution-oriented critical thinking comprised the skills that defined the 21st century knowledge worker (Drucker, 2001).

The Importance of Relationships in Student Success

The critical factors posited by Marzano (2006) with regards to learning highlighted the importance of relationships in the learning process. The relationship between student and teacher, between the students and their inner dialogue regarding efficacy and relevance, and between the students in a classroom were all topics of study and discussion. However, this review of the literature uncovered another aspect previously unaddressed, and that was the relationship between African American males, the key role of their cultural identification, their dis-identification with the educational system, and the valuable role cooperative learning played in utilizing systemized group inclusion as a cultural buffer in the collaborative setting. Cummins (2009) maintained that the goal of boosting achievement resulted in little to no movement of the academic needle with regard to minorities. While policymakers focused on data, the function of

relationships in successful learning was omitted from dialogue regarding student success. However, Marzano (2006) dictated that such relationships were indispensable for learning to take place; absent that supportive structure, no engagement was possible. Classrooms behaved as small societies wherein personalities were navigated among both teachers and students, and the messages communicated in this learning forum were as important to the individual learner as the content addressed (Cummins, 2009). Accordingly, resolving the pattern of underachievement by African American males addressed the issue of cultural devaluation and the cultural framework that supported this failure (Cummins, 2009).

Learning necessitated that students think, developing a thorough understanding that allowed them to apply the principles of constructing knowledge in a realistic way. Referred to as 'authentic pedagogy', this framework for learning achieved gains in student performance regardless of ethnic boundaries (Newmann & Wehlage 1995). Newmann and Wehlage (1995) found that the schools that effectively met performance goals had realized the means by which to focus their school community of staff and students on a shared objective. These schools created a collaborative community that extended from the school to the teachers to the classroom, highlighting collective accountability for student learning and uniting with professional communities to enhance student learning (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). Such schools were the subject of a longitudinal study by Darling-Hammond (2007b). Her research focused on schools that restructured to personalize education and foster collaborative learning structures that yielded higher academic gains across demographic boundaries. This study underscored the importance of structured collaboration that allowed for adaptation of instruction,

personalization, and strong relationships (Darling-Hammond, 2007b). Teachers in the schools noted that each individual was viewed as important and the probability of 'falling through the cracks' was extremely unlikely, given the focus on all student achievement. Additionally, students at these schools recognized the impact of these relationships on their education and were motivated to achieve, because they felt that someone genuinely cared about their education (Cotton, 2001). The curriculum also addressed many cultures, blending cultural content to integrate with the course of study and connected this back to students' own experiences in order to facilitate identification with the principles and fosters student engagement (Darling-Hammond, 2007b).

Breaking anonymity and creating relationships were key to good academics in the schools studied. Collaboration provided the structure by which to accomplish this goal on a school-wide basis (Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair, & Lehr, 2004).

Collaborative learning did not hinge on a sole procedure for learning. The collaboration process incorporated academic activities, such as reading, analyzing, and discussing, which activated various processes of information gathering, such as deduction, prediction, and synthesis (Prince, 2004). Students were unable to learn in groups; they learned from engagement in activities that generated critical thinking. In fact, collaboration hinged on individual thought and reasoning that generated discussion, agreement, and the disagreement that sparked reflection and deliberation. The field of collaborative learning had as much to do with the activities and procedures that created these conversations, as putting students in a group (Prince, 2004). These conversations occurred more frequently in collaboration than in an individual learning environment, due to the mechanisms involved in collaborative pedagogy that facilitated dialogues and

student-centered reflections (Estes, 2004). The assessments tied into the learning process monitored student-growth; a data collection process that ostensibly measured improvement. However, improving learning required that the academic journey comprised introspection, reflection, and collaboration that transformed the dialogue and built relationships (Estes, 2004). Cooperative learning utilized an academic environment that encouraged and honed interpersonal skills (Prince, 2004).

Tenets for Success in Collaborative Learning Environments

The tenets for student success in collaborative learning included a clear set of student outcomes and a clear description of the specific information and skills acquired in the task that allowed students to visualize the final goal. In keeping with Marzano (2006) the critical first step required student ‘buy- in’. Cooperative learning dictated both individual involvement in the process, as well as a commitment to helping everyone in the group attain mastery of the principle being studied. Effective learning occurred with heterogeneous groupings that allowed for student interaction and tolerance of one another’s views and thought processes (Stahl, 1994). This collaborative structure allowed for the exploration of diverse viewpoints and the strategic seeking of proof, while examining alternate interpretations. Such groupings allowed students to demonstrate leadership, build trust, practice constructive criticism, encourage compromise, and manage conflict under the guidance of the teacher’s clarification of expected social interactions (Stahl, 1994). This type of structured learning specifically addressed the needs of the African American male student that fostered a framework of inclusion, relevance, and engagement (Stahl, 1994). The researcher believed this ideal further focused on the emerging STEM pedagogy that gained popularity in many public

institutions.

The STEM pedagogy comprised a system of learning that integrated interdisciplinary knowledge application and structures around the cooperative efforts of students. This framework for learning furnished the students with a significant, relevant, and complete approach that addressed learning across multiple subject areas (Sanders, 2009). A relatively new approach to student and teacher development, the method required a systematic design to ensure quality and accountability in meeting today's disciplinary standards. STEM education provided a bridge for students, education providers, and the business community to more effectively develop learning pathways in technology-driven careers (Sanders, 2009). The basic premise upon which STEM was founded called for a student-centered model that blended design and inquiry, accessed Bloom’s taxonomy through engagement, explanation, exploration, engineering, and evaluating as part of the educational process (Burke, 2014). Harkening back to Darling-Hammond’s (2000) study of successful schools, the STEM design incorporated each of the aspects that were deemed important in building both a successful school and educating a diverse student body. Students were able to link new information with their current knowledge, related concrete information as big ideas, and explained essential questions, applying their learning in new contexts (McTighe et al., 2012). This contextual approach to learning allowed students to relate to what was being presented as relevant and applicable knowledge. Relevance of learning to the individual allowed for greater ‘buy-in’, fostering a deeper connection to both the learning process and the information obtained (McTighe et al., 2012).

The Critical Importance of Campus Climate in Learning

Campus climate was recognized as an ‘intangible’, but critical, aspect of how students, teachers, and administrators perceived the attitudes and interactions comprising racial and ethnic diversity (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1998). While the nation could not change the past regarding diversity, schools addressed the value of cultural diversity in education. Hurtado’s (1992) study confirmed that tension receded in an environment where students felt they were valued. Peer groups in a school setting also influenced the feelings and actions of students, creating standards that were communicated to the larger group. Though teachers and administrators may weigh considerably in the creation of campus climate, students themselves set the tone for campus climate (Feldman & Newcomb, 1969). This enhanced the importance of the peer-to-peer classroom interactions in which students engaged with other students. Activities that provided ample opportunity for positive cross-racial interaction provided an environment of cooperation in which all students were afforded equal status (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). With a curriculum design that incorporated racial and ethnic diversity into the activities, students learned about one another, as well.

Such an approach communicated the importance of everyone within the learning community and established a safe and viable structure on which to build relationships. Slavin (1990) underscored that far-reaching effects of such a climate, concluding that a cooperative learning environment that identified each student as valuable and important led to a positive effect on student self-esteem; students viewed themselves as productive members of a cooperative group and of society as well. The most important link between campus climate and collaborative learning was found in utilizing the full potential of

collaborative learning to advance and nurture a shared responsibility of learning goals that claimed ownership of knowledge by and for each individual (Hurtado et al., 1998).

Summary

Active engagement in the learning process comprised the necessary first step towards academic achievement (Marzano, 2001). Historically, African American males experienced a dis-identification with the public school system, which they viewed as a construct that had little to offer them by way of financial support beyond graduation. The startling statistics of dropout and incarceration rates among African American males pointed to the critical need to address how to engage these students in the learning process (Sommers, 2000).

At the time of this writing, thus far policies had not adequately addressed how to provide and develop skills in this particular population to meet the needs for employment in the global marketplace (Nembhard, 2005). The persistent unequal academic outcomes in education created an ever-widening gap as technology and industry deindustrialization impacted the job market (Donnor & Shockley, 2010). Within the standardized testing of NCLB, “routinized learning and ‘basic’ skills were encouraged by absolute systems of accountability” (Donnor & Shockley, 2010, p. 49). However, the trend towards a knowledgeable society called for skilled workers who were capable of drawing on background from education and experiences in order to address the tasks (Donnor & Shockley, 2010).

Collaboration approached learning in a way that supported the 21st century worker (Garber, 2013). Such a curriculum design delivered the skillset required by knowledgeable workers in a global marketplace while simultaneously addressing the

particular needs of the African American student (Cummins, 2009). Employing collaborative learning in the classroom offered students a safe environment in which to explore their own ideas and those of others as they worked cooperatively towards a meaningful goal. The key tenets of collaboration promoted the critical areas of cultural inclusion, efficacy, relevance, and engagement that were important factors in establishing student ‘buy in’ (2001). Dey and Hurtado’s (1995) study across schools illustrated the transformative power of a school and curriculum that was centered on the success of each individual, holding fast to the premise of collective accountability for student learning.

Chapter Three: Methodology

The purpose of this study was to engage in ethnographic research involving Jack E. Singley Academy (JESA), which was part of the Irving Independent School District in Irving, Texas. This high school was recognized throughout the state as one of its most successful high schools for educating students grades 9-12 ("Jack E. Singley Academy", 2015). At the time of this study, JESA had a large population of minority students. For the purpose of this study, the researcher conducted a case study of African American males who performed above average in the academic setting of JESA. The researcher held specific interest in the performance of African-American male students at JESA, since the academic performance of this subgroup of enrollment at this school was consistently ahead of other high schools situated in the state of Texas. In the researcher's opinion, this subgroup was generally on the wrong side of what was described as an 'achievement gap'. However, African-American males were succeeding in their academic performance at JESA ("Jack E. Singley Academy", 2015). The researcher intended to explore how this high school was effective in preparing these students for academic success. The research methods employed for this study, and outlined in this chapter, specify the rationale for applying the qualitative research method. The primary elements included in this methodological approach consisted of the research sample, data-collection methods, analysis, and synthesis of data, instrumentation, validity and reliability of the research, and the limitations of the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008).

Appropriateness of Research Design

As a high school counselor, the researcher worked with African American male students, many of whom did not experience academic success and were not motivated to

take advantage of advanced academic offerings in the regular high school program. The academic design of JESA was described as a college and career preparatory approach, operating a specialization-focused school with a mission to prepare all of its students for success during their high school experience and after graduation (Connecticut Technical High School System, 2014). This school served a predominantly minority population from its surrounding community and realized considerable success in promoting academic achievement. The researcher conducted an ethnographic study of the target population and its academic achievements to ascertain how this high school promoted academic success.

Creswell (1998) identified five primary traditions pertaining to the qualitative design, including case study, ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory, and narrative research. The qualitative research approach allowed “emergent rather than tightly prefigured” suppositions to develop as the study progressed, enabling the researcher to explore the complexities of the participants’ views of a situation as they developed (Creswell, 2003, p. 180). This flexible framework enabled the researcher to further examine the connections participants made between their past, lived experiences, and their then-current daily social interactions, permitting a deep construction of meaning. The qualitative approach was chosen due to its exploratory nature. The importance of the variables to examine were not yet clear and merited a qualitative approach because the topic was not addressed with this group (Morse, 1991). By contrast, the quantitative approach would hypothesize, test, isolate, and predict from information already gleaned from a particular group. Employing fixed data, the quantitative method attempted to uncover a cause and effect relationship. Therefore, the quantitative approach

would fall short in interpreting the social and cultural significance that provided the context for this study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008).

When an issue shows scant research and provides few plausible explanations, qualitative methodologies, such as ethnographies, enable the researcher to unearth enough data to produce conjectural foundations and advance new lines of inquiry (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999). This flexible process evolved through the experiential responses of the participants as they shared individual observations of their lived realities (Creswell, 1998). Ethnography design placed the researcher, inclusive of his or her own background, emotions, and experiences, in a central position of the study research (Britten et al., 2002). The researcher strived to observe and record events, suggesting accounts of the witnessed social phenomena. This approach, while interpretative, was decided to be most appropriate for this study (Creswell, 1998). The researcher sought to discover cultural and individual associations within a specific group, examined students' unique perspectives constructed from interaction within the daily life of a narrow social group (Lowenberg, 1993). Seeking to uncover ideas, beliefs, and characteristics of this group, the researcher believed this type of research design and data could lead to shared values and attitudes that contributed to the success of the African American male subgroup of students.

Informal participant interviews allowed the researcher to gain detailed, rich, personal accounts in a setting that were both familiar and comfortable for the participants. The rapport that the researcher developed in his capacity as a Jack E. Singley counselor created an affinity with the participants that allowed them to share their views more easily on academic, personal, cultural, and private subjects (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree,

2006).

Ethnographic Questioning

The interviews conducted in this study permitted the researcher to proceed with a strategic approach, while allowing for responsiveness to the participants' information and cues (Hughes, 1992). Spradley (1979) identified the element of explicit purpose, appropriateness of ethnographic interviews, and ethnographic questioning that enabled the participants to organize and categorize their individual perceptions. There were three categories of ethnographic questioning, consisting of descriptive, structural, and contrast questions. The descriptive line of questioning provided the interviewer with a general overview, through the use of open-ended questions. Structural questions provided specific information and were asked concurrently with the descriptive questions to request additional information and verify data already collected. Contrast questions allowed the interviewer to discern the meaning of the participants by helping them to sort information and perceptions (Spradley, 1979). The researcher's goal through questioning was to arrive at an individual interpretation of what the participants experienced in the setting of the classroom and the school, explore their evaluations of the interactions, and understand more fully the meaning they attached to those events (Firth, 1961; Hymes & Farr, 1982). The goal of the researcher was to explore, through participant interviews, the ideas, beliefs, and perceptions characteristic of this group of participants (Fetterman, 1989).

Research Sample

The site of the study was Jack E Singley Academy in Irving, Texas. This Texas high school had a 2013 enrollment of 1660 students, with an 89% minority population

("Jack E. Singley Academy", p. 1). Each study participant attended JESA for at least three of their four high school years ("Prospective Students - Applications", n.d.). Additionally, participants were current students in good academic standing at the high school at the time of the interviews. Therefore, the site for the study offered a pool of participants who were of African American ethnicity and attended JESA. This allowed the researcher access to participants who could provide detailed and rich information for this study.

Participants

Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) applied the word 'sample' to quantitative research. Therefore, the word 'participant' was used to refer to the individuals included in this qualitative study (Creswell, 2002). The researcher employed a purposive sampling and selected participants based on their ethnicity and current enrollment in JESA. A purely random selection of 12 to 20 student participants was conducted and one member of the administrative team was solicited for participation. Additionally, five to ten teacher participants were chosen in the same manner outlined above to complete open-ended questionnaires.

The researcher attended meetings at the school, at the invitation of the principal, to explain the study and seek participation of both staff and students. Working with the JESA administration, the researcher located student participants based on selection criteria, such as grade level, and ethnicity, that would generate a group of participants whose backgrounds would provide the information-rich material needed to address the research questions.

The criteria for the selection of participants was based upon the focus of the

research questions. All of the participants were African American males considered academically successful due to their current enrollment status at JESA, and who had attended JESA for three of the four years of their high school tenure

This study consisted of eleven male student participants enrolled in JESA. Although the participants share the characteristics listed above, they differed in their educational attainments, of specialty within the school, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The teacher participants were selected from a pool of teachers who had worked at JESA for more than two years and taught for more than three years.

Research Questions

(1) What was the culture and attitude toward education at Jack E Singley High School and how did it contribute to the success of its students overall?

(2) Why did the culture of this school work so well?

(3) What did it mean to be successful in this school?

(4) How did this school culture interact with African American culture?

(5) How were African American male students engaged at this school?

(6) How and why were young African American male students in this school successful?

(7) Why was this high school successful with its African American male students?

Research Design

Based upon the data compiled by The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a report provided by The Council of the Great City Schools (2010) that included disaggregated data, demonstrated the academic achievement gap between African American males and Caucasian students. This report, further clarified the need to find insight into how and why this academic disparity continued to be exhibited within

the education of the African American male. The same study offered additional insights into the African American males who achieved academic success, citing through interviews the importance of role models, mentors, and clearly defined goals as avenues to success (Lewis, Simon, Uzzell, Horwitz & Casserly, 2010). This spoke to the critical importance of addressing the failure of public education to meet the needs of the African American male (Lewis et al., 2010). Determining the underlying reasons for the success of JESA demonstrated how this marginalized population achieved academic success and provided a focus for the direction of this study.

The researcher commenced the data collection for this study through an exhaustive literature review, in order to determine what avenues other scholars had pursued when studying this issue. As the instances of well-documented, ongoing academic success of the African American male in one particular setting were scarce, the researcher turned to defining best practices and located scholarly articles, books, and information to help elucidate the reasons for the dis-identification of the African American male with public education.

Assistant Principal Kennedy acted in collaboration with the researcher to focus on students at JESA whose ethnicity, background, and academic standing identified students as prospective participants for the study. Kennedy had detailed information regarding these requirements that allowed the researcher to narrow the list of possible participants.

Informed Consent

The purpose of this study was communicated to the participants either through a letter sent to the home of the participant, or a phone call to the parent of the participant. Parents of students were provided with letters of informed consent and requested to sign

and return the consent forms to the researcher within one week. Participation was voluntary; students were free to decline or withdraw from the study. The consent forms included the contact information for the researcher, as well as a brief description of the research purpose and preliminary schedule. Letters of informed consent were also provided to the teacher participants in the study, signed, and returned by the participants who elected to complete the questionnaires. Teacher participants were notified that their involvement was voluntary and they would suffer no repercussions from refusal to participate or from withdrawal at any time during the course of the study. The study posed no known risks to the participants.

Confidentiality

The participants were informed that their identities would be kept confidential. This information was repeated before the start of each individual interview, as well. The names of all of the participants were changed, applying fictitious names to each participant and removing identifying personal information to maintain the confidentiality of the participants. Participant interviews were designated with a participant number. Personal information that could lead to identification of the participant was limited to access by the researcher alone. All transcripts and recordings were stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's office.

Participant Contact and Scheduled Interviews

For those participants contacted, who proved willing to contribute to the research, individual demographics were confirmed via email or phone conversation to establish the accuracy of the data. Participant interviews were held in the conference room of JESA to allow for the comfort and ease of access on the part of the participants. As an

ethnographic study, perhaps more fully than any other qualitative study, attempts to understand the background and framework from which the participants build their perceptions, the setting facilitated the interviewer's ability to gain a clearer understanding of the views of the participants (Kvale, 1996). The participant interviews generated in-depth and rich description. Though the questions were scripted, the researcher had the ability to follow-up with more probing questions to elicit clarification. This amplification of information often helped to inform the researcher regarding the previous interviews as well. The timing for the interviews took place during the fall semester, 2012. Keeping in mind Silverman's (2010) guidelines for successful interviews, the researcher built upon the rapport already established by virtue of his role as a school counselor for Jack E. Singley Academy, guiding the interviews through the structured questioning while eliciting deeper responses when required with pre-established lines of follow-up questioning. The interviews were recorded on the researcher's iPad for later transcription. The transcriptions provided ease of access to the data by breaking the conversation down into page and line numbers, affording the ability to analyze the data for themes.

Focus Group Discussion

The focus group discussion occurred after the completion of the individual participant interviews. This discussion took place at the conference room of JESA, also during the fall semester, 2012. Nine of the 11 participants were present at the follow-up focus group discussion. This loosely structured discussion facilitated further reflection while also providing additional triangulation and validation of the individual participant responses. Allowing an easy flow of information, the comfortable discourse among the participants unearthed rich information. Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) discussed the

importance of this discussion in constructing deeper meaning as the participants combined their own perceptions with those of the group. Additionally, the verification of the data obtained through the previous interviews generated another layer of credibility for the identification of themes. The focus group was recorded on the researcher’s iPad and later transcribed for data analysis.

Instrumentation

The researcher served as the sole person through which data was collected for this study (Boyd, 1993). The interview setting required a trust and rapport that required a level of connection between the researcher, as a counselor for Jack E. Singley Academy, and participants. It was important for the interviewer to build and use this rapport in order to arrive at the deeper information and accompanying perceptions of the participants. Consequently, no qualitative methodology existed without some degree of interpretation from the interviewer. However, the researcher observed the standards that ensured quality and reliability and maintained flexibility with regards to responses of the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Yin, 2009). The qualitative research design method emphasized the researcher’s role while regarding the researcher as an additional active participant in the study (Creswell, 2005).

Instruments for collection of data were interview questions, focus-group questions, and questionnaire.

Data Collection

The descriptions and observation of the interview data were chosen to convey accurate representations and descriptive narrative “that would enable a clear understanding of the issue within an ethnographic framework” (Wolcott, 1994, p. 13).

Data collection for this study included the use of student demographic data such as ethnicity designation of African American, enrollment as a senior, and enrolled in the school three or more years, in order to isolate the participants from the larger student body of JESA. Personal interviews with the participants and a follow-up focus group allowed the researcher to check the accuracy of the data, incorporating triangulation, rich description, and peer debriefing (Creswell, 2003).

Data Analysis

Creswell (2003) defined data analysis as a process by which the researcher makes sense of the words and images from the data. The researcher organized the data, breaking the interviews down by participant. Employing the suggestion of Lofland and Lofland (1984) the researcher relied on the organization of transcription of the data, beginning with a broad overview of the written dialogue. Using the information gathered from the literature review, the researcher examined the data, tracking the information gleaned through memos, questions, and reference citations that furthered reflected back to the body of research that originally informed this study.

The data was organized through coding according to theme. Data was prepared and sorted to facilitate the clarification of the data and allowed specific themes to emerge. Though the participants' responses were unique, the consistent questioning and targeted analysis enabled the researcher to the identification of similar themes. The themes that developed lent themselves to easy organization into relevant categories. Using the data analysis of the eight steps required by Tesch (1990), the researcher achieved a sense of the interviews as a whole. Arriving at an idea for the totality of the data, the researcher notated the key words and phrases in the interviews, using both written notes, as well as

global searches of transcribed data in Word 2013, to ensure that the list was compiled in its entirety based on emergent themes. Related ideas were then gathered under broader categorical designations. Categorical designations elicited major topics, more narrow topics, and those unique to individual participants. Further coding of the interview transcriptions led to new themes and additional insight into the data. The final coding abbreviations and preliminary data analysis followed. The interpretation of the meaning of the data called for analysis to discover what educational value the research had generated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The insights that materialized suggested a proposed direction for future research.

Validity and Reliability

Lincoln and Guba (1998) referred to the issue of trustworthiness in research, pointing to issues such as dependability, credibility, confirmability, and transferability as key components of valid research. This ethnographic study provided for the use of multiple data sources, inclusive of literature sources, teacher participant questionnaires, student participant interviews, and a follow-up focus group. These multiple fields of data collection provided rigor to the study and augmented the validity of the results (Yin, 2009). Triangulation, through the use of multiple data sources, permitted a more careful examination of the data collected (Lincoln & Guba, 2005). Through the questionnaires and focus group data, triangulation allowed the researcher to “corroborate interview data with information from other sources” (Yin, 2009, p. 109).

The researcher’s care in identifying the source and location of the data ensured the dependability of the data for the study. Transcriptions of the interviews were given to participants for verification and their signatures. A clear and well-documented audit trail

provided the researcher an ability to follow the natural progression of the data analysis and arrive at the same or similar conclusions regarding the findings of the study. The use of time-tested methodology, enacted in a consistent, practiced manner enhanced the credibility of the data. The findings of the data were strengthened through triangulation, substantiated by the additional data, and reviewed once more through the lens provided by the literature review.

The researcher ascertained the importance of creating a study wherein the transferability of the data enabled the results to be applied to another group or population (Shank, 2006). The detailed insights supplied through interviews, detailed data analysis, and focus group follow-up permitted ease of transferability to another group of participants or similarly situated population, such as another ethnicity or gender group (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Limitations of the Study

This qualitative study had limitations, one of which hinged on the subjectivity of the researcher. Unlike quantitative methodology, which is based upon an outcome supplied by hard and fast data and causal relationships, qualitative research is subjected to the influences of the subjectivity of the researcher (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2000). Indeed, this issue has been an underpinning of the ongoing criticism of qualitative methodology (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2000). Therefore, precautions throughout the process allowed the researcher to generate a rich, extensive, and meaningful collection of data, through multiple, well-documented avenues of information. The researcher sought to maintain subjective distance through strict documentation of the interviews.

Additionally, the researcher chose the participants randomly, assigning them participant numbers before analyzing themes.

The researcher comprised an additional limitation to the study. As an African American male and a counselor for Jack E. Singley Academy, the researcher was a stakeholder in the educational process of these young men. Owing to a shared gender and ethnicity, the researcher may have unwittingly allowed his thoughts, feelings, and perceptions to guide the research or skew the results. The participants may have been reluctant to open up fully to the researcher, as they were familiar with his role as counselor at Jack E. Singley Academy and his connection to the school and individual student academic data. However, the initial discussions with the participants that explained the researcher's desire to unearth the valuable information that might lead to substantive insight into this research topic proved to mitigate any hesitancy that the participants may have felt in discussing these issues with the researcher. Consequently, the researcher took great pains to fashion a familiar and comfortable environment for the student participants, ensuring that they trusted that their uniquely personal views were valued and protected from judgment. The interviews took place when the students would not lose seat time in class, and the focus group allowed for a positive and empowering interaction among the student participants. The outcome resulted in a strong sense of empowerment and pride on the part of the participants when viewing their academic and personal achievements and pondering their future career and academic prospects.

Summary

The ethnographic approach outlined in this chapter comprised the basis for the qualitative research methodology employed in this study. The researcher sought to

capture one particular case of a group of participants from a marginalized demographic that had succeeded academically against odds documented in the literature review. The personal interviews of these participants allowed information to emerge that explained, in part, how the unique structure at JESA enabled these African American males to overcome the challenges that other students, situated similarly with regards to ethnicity and demographic data, experienced in public education.

Jack E Singley Academy, the site of the study, functioned to provide access to this demographic while also affording unique access to a population of academically successful African American males. The exhaustive literature review, which provided the foundation for the research questions and informed the process, proved indispensable in digging deeper in order to access the specific, relevant answers the researcher sought to gain through these interviews. The insight provided by the teacher participants proved instrumental in augmenting and validating the data, underscoring and confirming both the data from the student participant interviews as well as the evidence from the literature review.

This research sought to contribute, through singular access to a small group of academically successful African American males, valuable insight into both the personal and institutional explanations for their success. While much research on this particular point focused on the problems plaguing the public education system with regards to the African American male, the opportunity to plumb the personal perceptions and explore the institutional components in one school with an academically successful participant group was limited. This study pointed to possible solutions, best practices, and avenues for transfer of knowledge to other districts, campuses, and administration teams that

could positively impact the future of education for African American males in the public school system.

Chapter Four: Data Analysis and Findings

Overview

This chapter is comprised of two sections: the first section is a brief summary of demographic and participant detail that illustrates the challenges faced by the participants as African American males in the Texas public education system. The subsequent section explores the themes that evolved from the participant interviews, follow-up discussion, and teacher questionnaires. The combination of this data allowed the researcher insight to each proposed research question.

The purpose of this study was to examine the academic performance of African American males in one of the most academically successful high schools in the state of Texas, JESA in Irving, TX. Given the success this school experienced with African American males, the researcher believed in the importance of investigating the aspects of school culture, student engagement, and educational factors that contributed to the academic success of the participants. For the purpose of this study, academic success was defined as a student who was on track to graduate. Seven research questions were formed to guide the discussion and provided opportunity for clarification and redirection, if necessary, to harvest the rich detail needed from the participant interviews. Analysis of the data resulted in numerous areas of overlap between questions. The overlap created redundancies in the analysis that were resolved by combining research questions to present the findings in a concise, coherent approach.

Survey Participants

The 12 adolescent black males who took part in this study identified themselves as 12th grade African American male students. Each student participant was enrolled as a

full-time student who attended all four high school years enrolled at Irving Independent School District, with three or more years at JESA. At this school, each student participant was placed on a specialty track of study as early as the freshman or sophomore year. In the senior year, each participant obtained an internship in the chosen specialty or area of study. If this internship was not obtained, students were enrolled in a project-based course in which a specialty portfolio was developed, titled Problems and Solutions. After the freshman year, students were not allowed to switch into another specialty program. Although each student applied to a lottery-based drawing for enrollment, neither GPA, behavior, special education classification, nor testing qualified for admission. Additionally, students' grades were assessed based on their employability. Their behavior, promptness, and professional demeanor inside and outside of the classroom determined this employability score. The importance of this aspect of JESA was at the heart of the approach to education.

The teacher participants who took part in this study were comprised of staff at JESA who had been teaching for at least two years. Of the nine teacher participants included in the research, all received a survey questionnaire. The distribution of questionnaires yielded a 100% response rate among the teacher participants. Comprised of nine questions, the queries were each designed to elicit an open-ended response.

The research design allowed for student participant interviews, the use of an open-ended questionnaire provided to the teacher participants, and student participation in a focus group. These offered the researcher multiple resources for data, affording stronger validity to the results extracted from the participant interviews. This

triangulation provided corroboration and unearthed additional topics that may be addressed in future studies.

Research Questions

(1) What was the culture and attitude toward education at Jack E. Singley and how did it contribute to the success of its students overall?

(2) Why did the culture of this school work so well?

(3) What did it mean to be successful in this school?

(4) How did this school culture interact with African American culture?

(5) How were African American students engaged at this school?

(6) How and why were African American male students in this school successful?

(7) Why was this high school successful with its African American male students?

Combined Research Questions (CRQ)

(1) What was the culture at JESA towards academic and personal success for every student?

(2) How were African American males engaged at this school academically and socially?

(3) How and why was JESA successful with academic engagement of its African American male students?

The researcher chose the ethnographic method for this qualitative study. This methodology provided the participants an opportunity to describe uniquely personal facets of their individual paths to academic success. Eleven participants, who met the criteria of academic success as an African American male at Jack E. Singley Academy, were interviewed in order to gain a description of how their years at JESA shaped their

academic achievement. The interviews were performed after signed and approved consent forms were obtained for each participant. To maintain validity of the data, interviews were recorded by the researcher. Discussions took place at JESA during times when students were not scheduled in class, which prevented participants from missing valuable seat time in class. The location was convenient to both the researcher and the participants. Interviews were spaced over the course of a week, and a follow-up discussion focus group permitted all participants to review their interviews and reflect on additional information they believed would augment the findings of the researcher.

Description and Demographics of Participants

The study involved 11 participants for face-to-face interviews; all identified as African American males enrolled in 12th grade at JESA. The response of each participant in the face-to-face interview guided the documentation of findings for this research. The researcher created interview questions for the purpose of obtaining detailed insight that elucidated the seven research questions posed by this study. Themes emerged from the interviews based on the student participants' responses. The examination of those themes and the analysis of the complementary data derived from the questionnaires and focus group highlighted specific and unique themes.

Each student participant for this research attended JESA for at least three years of the high school career. They were submitted as student participants with the assistance of the Testing and Research Director for the Irving Independent School District at the time of this study. Twelve students who fit the criteria were selected from the Aware database. Of the 11 students who responded, all were chosen for the research study. All student participants chosen met the criteria of being academically successful 12th grade students

and African American males enrolled at JESA. Brief descriptions of the demographics of the individual student participants provided the researcher additional insight into the individual responses regarding the school culture and their personal academic successes.

Teacher participants were randomly selected from a list of teachers employed during the Fall 2013 semester, and each teacher participant was invited to contribute to the study through email. Those teachers who responded were given the opportunity to complete an open-ended questionnaire; each confidentially emailed. The researcher provided one week of time for teacher participants to review, complete, and return the questionnaires by email. Permission forms were signed in the office of the researcher, located at JESA, and kept locked in a file cabinet for confidentiality.

Student Participants

Student participant #1, Howard was a first floor engineering student who described himself as a "Goodie two shoes; the kind that jokes around." His main goal was to one day be successful enough as a software designer or software engineer. Howard said that mother requested his transfer to JESA. Howard chose JESA particularly for the robotics program offered through the school. Having completed the courses, Howard was engaged in the practicum stage of the Robotics Program that required the student to find a project and map out the design and production of the project for presentation.

Student participant #2, Carson was a second floor criminal justice student who expressed a strong desire to enlist in the Marines, travel, and see the world. The main goal he discussed was to graduate. Carson said that this was the first school he attended for his entire school career. Having moved around a great deal, he was unable to establish lasting friendships until coming to JESA. He described himself as "diplomatic .

. . [he doesn't] like when things are not fair." It was the combination of professionalism and communication at JESA that he said made learning easier.

Student participant #3, Rodger was a third floor culinary arts student who was interested in having a career as a chef. One day he would like to open his own restaurant in multiple locations across the country. Rodger said that being a student at JESA has helped him "learn the business and management side and . . . helped [him] become a better person, become more confident and more self-aware." He described school as "a second home" and filled with people that he knows care about him and his success.

Student participant #4, Ron was a third floor cinematic student who came to JESA for the animation program. Ron revealed that he had no desire to be "prom king or anything like that." His focus in coming to the academy was in learning the details of the technology offered and preparing for a job in animation. He felt that his success at the academy was due to his ability to "be a complete student" and tap into his full potential.

Student participant #5, Billy was a first floor information technology student who expressed a strong desire to attend college. While he wanted to get a job with a game programming company, he recognized that he would get "the degree first [and] register for college for two years" before going on to a full university program. Billy defined success as graduating from college and having a family. He described his academic knowledge as being "underdeveloped" prior to his enrollment at JESA. His family could not afford a private school; JESA offered him both academic excellence and the teacher guidance that he needed in order to succeed.

Student participant #6, Greg was a third floor cinematic arts-audio video technology student, Greg described himself as "not as athletic as others are nor am I as

smart as others are, but I'm very artistic . . . I have just as much dream as anyone else has." Greg planned "on majoring in theater and minoring in music performance, hopefully [to] move up [and] to go to Julliard and make it on Broadway." Greg described his goals as offering a way to "invent [his] life." The opportunity to make his parents proud and be a role model for the upcoming freshman classes were motivating factors in working towards academic success.

Student participant #7, Elliot was a first floor information technology student who described himself as "little smarter than other students." Elliot identified himself as a "quick learner" who actively sought out the higher-level classes, choosing AP classes for their rigor. He was also on the academic decathlon team at JESA. Elliot explained that the teachers at JESA really wanted him to go to college and be successful, and they expected the students to "be on point" with everything that is asked of them. He ascribed his success academically to a love of math, which helped him to engage more deeply in the engineering specialty that he was studying and will support him in his chosen career as a computer engineer. He hoped to attend Cal-Tech to study computer engineering.

Student participant #8, Walter was a second floor legal criminal justice student who knew since he was in middle school that he wanted a career in criminal justice. He was drawn to JESA because they had a program that would allow him to pursue a career as a police officer. The four-year program allowed him to know with certainty that this would be a good career fit for him. After spending four years learning the basics of his specialty and mastering the components of the law, he knew that he would pursue educational goals that would further his career plans. Walter regarded the specialization at JESA as a major factor in preparing for college and career.

Student participant #9, Chandler was a second floor health science student who came to JESA to study in the medical field. He chose a career as an occupational therapist. He determined that his chosen career path will likely require four years of college and a master's degree. He believed that the hands-on experience and the early start helped him achieve both short-term goals and move quickly towards larger academic goals after graduation from high school. Chandler explained that his teachers were stricter about getting work completed and submitted on time. He explained that the teachers at JESA also "know the rule book" and helped students stay on track both academically and helped to keep students "in order."

Student participant #10, Pearson was a first floor engineering student who conveyed a desire to go on to play college football with a scholarship and pursue a degree in either engineering or psychology. He appreciated the focus at JESA of helping students prepare for the college application and scholarship process. His main goal was being able to "have two nice cars" and support a loving family; he said, "I just want my happiness" out of life. Having combatted a drinking problem and anger issues, he viewed JESA as a path to a new start and the chance to establish a better reputation. Describing himself as "determined," Pearson said that he saw that he was standing in the way of his own success and had now shifted that determination to graduating from high school.

Student participant #11, Matthew was a second floor criminal justice student who was displaced by Hurricane Rita. His mother was instrumental in getting him to Texas, moving to find "a better life" following the devastation left in the wake of the hurricane. Matthew's goal was to graduate from school, pursue an engineering degree and perhaps own a garage. Matthew viewed the business management he learned at JESA

as instrumental in pursuing these goals. He felt the weight of responsibility for his learning shifted to his shoulders since coming to JESA and explained that this pushed him to be proactive in asking questions and making certain that he understood the content. He explained that “if [he doesn’t] get up and ask questions, [he’s] not going to pass the class.” Matthew was proud that even after a rough move and juggling a 38-hour work schedule in addition to school, he still woke up determined to graduate.

The following section details themes that arose through the interview process, focusing on the research questions posited in this study.

Results for Combined Research Question 1

What was the culture at JESA towards academic and personal success for every student? The student participants were asked questions about the overall school culture in order to arrive at their perceptions regarding the social perception of the school as it related to all students. Follow-up questions that probed deeper into their personal views provided amplification on how the school culture contributed positively to personal and academic success. The emergent themes from these interview questions revealed a collective view of JESA as an environment of acceptance that promoted the academic success of all students, regardless of cultural difference, ability, or background.

All participants communicated an ease and comfort with their school culture. The discussions regarding the school culture broadly addressed the student participants’ perceptions of the interaction between students in the classroom as well as peer-to-peer relationships beyond instruction time. One participant communicated that he “feels pretty comfortable in class,” stating that being an African American at JESA was a “pretty

normal" experience. Any pressure that related to classroom interactions stemmed from the weight of the participants' own expectations on their classroom achievement.

Two of the students stated they felt compelled to perform above normal expectations based on their race. Their reasoning rested in the argument that they wanted very much to redefine racial expectations and serve as role models by reaching goals above average. Greg shared a desire to "be like a role model to the freshmen, hopefully," communicating a desire to not only meet his own goals, but to help the younger students integrate with more ease into the school culture." Elliot described a school culture that also enhanced his own individuality and personal strength. He described a culture that not only "grounds [student] in their own, authentic personalities, but also allows them to convey that who they are will not change based on their surroundings." This insight was supported by two other students who alluded to a culture in which it was acceptable to be yourself, to be unique. Rodger described the student culture as one where you do not have to try hard to show yourself worthy of approval, recounting that his time in school helped him to express himself as a unique individual.

The participants' personal views on how this culture contributed to their success exposed the role that academic specialization played in establishing a culture of inclusion. Many of the participants explained that their ability to connect with students of other races who shared their same area of interest opened the door to better communication in and out of the classroom. The participants felt that they "fit in" because of their specialty; the specialization provided an immediate sense of belonging and camaraderie. All participants underscored the critical role that the academic specialties played in inclusion. Greg communicated that his specialty was one element

that facilitated his acceptance into the school culture, stating that it allowed students to "become close with one another."

Sense of Belonging and Friendship: "In a way I feel most of my friends are like my family so that is how I feel I fit in. I can get along with everybody, I can talk to everybody, I feel that it is not going to hurt me or make me feel uncomfortable because I am comfortable there."

Specialization Facilitated Communication and Inclusion: "I fit in everywhere because…the academy helps me fit in… I am paired up with people who want to do the same thing…we all have the same ideas…who have the same goals as you."

All of the participants described a positive identification with the school. During the interviews, the pride participants experienced as part of a school culture of professionalism was evident. The overwhelming consensus among the participants was that the school culture was firmly rooted in a sense of professionalism. This high school built the self-esteem of all of its students, including its African American students, by empowering them with life skills. In speaking of the role of the school in preparing them for success, one student shared an appreciation for both the opportunities and the social benefits that the school culture had afforded him.

Rare and fleeting instances of racial isolation were presented by a few of the participants. However, the examples had faded in relevancy over the years and the encounters had not affected their academic performance. The participants did not indicate that the instances of isolation in an academic setting based on race had occurred at JESA. In fact, not one participant indicated that any racial isolation had occurred in their experience in the classroom setting at JESA. One participant did indicate that his height,

which was taller than average, had sometimes made him a target for admonishment by teachers when his entire group was noisy. However, he did not suggest that it negatively impacted his feeling of inclusion or acceptance or that it was even race-related.

Alternately, one participant reported a strong sense of inclusion among the "smart kids" that cut through racial misconceptions. Elliot explained that the school culture among the AP students with whom he was placed in academics was that "they really try to help people who are also smart and also have a goal." This participant's view of the school culture presented an atmosphere of camaraderie among classmates with similar goals and ambitions, unencumbered by the aspects of racial relations that inhibited peer trust and rapport. The student participants articulated a school culture that effectively shifted the focus away from the stratifications of race. Understanding the need of students, particularly teenagers, for individuation and social acceptance within an academic setting, the institutional leaders of JESA created a framework that effectively minimized the role of ethnicity in the school culture, shifting the priority to education specialization and professional learning communities.

Results for Combined Research Question 2

How were African American males engaged at this school academically and socially? The aspect of academic and social interaction within the school culture was identified by the researcher as a critically important question. The setting in which students learn is often comprised of students ranging in age, ethnicity, academic ability, and economic backgrounds. Extrapolating even that simplified list of differentials across fields as broad as economics and racial backgrounds created an enormous diversity of individuals. Therefore, exploring the question of academic and social engagement of

African American males in the school setting allowed the researcher to uncover characteristics of JESA that contributed to positive involvement and motivation. One of the themes that emerged was that the culture of professionalism provided a framework that supported academic success. On the issue of social engagement, two very interesting concepts surfaced in the student participant interviews. The social engagement of African American students at JESA presented by the student participants reflected a relative ease of integration, an acceptance of a new, more authentic "self" within this setting, and a dis-identification with negative behaviors that they reported as stereotypical behaviors exhibited by stigmatized individuals. In fact, student participant responses reflected a marked distancing from what they viewed as negative stereotypes, embracing more positive options for social engagement that advanced both their acceptance as well as widening their own acceptance and understanding of other ethnicities.

Culture of Professionalism Builds Positive Social Identification With School: "When you come here to the academy, you are professional and everybody is in it together." One student participant described JESA as being a more open and optimistic environment, making it a "brighter and better place to learn." All of the participants communicated that JESA taught them how to conduct themselves in a positive, professional manner. Each of the participants used the word "professional" when describing JESA. It was clear from the participant interviews that a collective view of JESA as an academic culture founded upon the tenets of professional behavior had been clearly established. Two of the participants described actual examples of the academy's student expectations. Rodger discussed the use of a "trust card" at the school as a positive motivator. The "trust card," a card allowing a student the latitude to have music and

snacks in class, served as a tangible indication to the students and teachers of the benefits of professional behavior. Students earned this reward through punctuality, good grades, exemplar behaviors, etc. He indicated that use of such motivational tools reinforced the importance of academics, comportment, and actions while underscoring the inherent benefits in adopting good practices. Another participant said that dressing up in a more polished image had prepared him for interviews and afforded him greater confidence.

Five out of the 11 participants shared that they were “thankful” that they had been trained to hold themselves to a higher professional standard. One participant described the contrast between student behavior at JESA and other high schools. In seeing the behavior of students in the hallway at another school during a play, he felt “educated” in how to speak and how to present himself so that the world would see him as a professional. He shared that he was grateful because he now felt better prepared to move into a career. When faced with an upcoming audition on short notice, another student described how the skills that JESA had already given him allowed him to plan, map out his goals, and get prepared. He explained, “I think I nailed it. I was so respectful and so responsible… it just helped me.”

The positive identification with school led to involvement in clubs, competitions and extracurricular activities that supported and enhanced the student’s achievements. One of the students was involved in an Academic Decathlon as well as other clubs. He contended that his participation would contribute towards helping him build his college resume. This student explained that he wanted to be involved in more clubs in high school, and JESA helped with that because they were “all about students doing more.” Elliot described the internship program as genuinely helpful. He indicated that the

expectation of the school was that a student “[had] to go out, [had] to get dressed up professionally and [had] to find a job. [They had] to do the interview [and] have a resume; and they [JESA] really help[ed] you prepare for all of that.”

The teacher respondents indicated similar views on the culture of professionalism, framing it as positive preparation for college and career. Winston wrote that the specialty programs at JESA provided students the academic training they needed to perform at the college level, offered them the opportunity to learn valuable skills that would result in job offers immediately after high school. This training also aided students in supporting themselves while they completed a four-year program. The teacher participants believed that the culture of professional expectations gave students a good shot at beating the odds. Teacher participants framed the inclusion of what they referred to as “21st Century skills and learning” as being critical components of student success. One teacher claimed that students were better prepared for the academic setting at a higher institution of learning or the workplace because they had learned valuable management and technology skills at JESA. Rachelle discussed the concern many teachers had in the diminishing importance of the aspect of specialty and professional training as the importance of district initiatives designed to align with state mandated testing and which had begun to undermine the mission of JESA. She pointed what she termed “the trademark qualities” of JESA as appealing to students’ sense of academic prioritization; students chose JESA because they did not want to waste their time on subjects they would not use. This teacher perceived a targeted approach to education created a greater “buy in” among the student population in which each student had an active role in targeting their strengths and aligning it with core competencies that integrated with a preferred profession.

African American males at JESA experienced social engagement that ranged from individual engagement in peer interactions to engagement in academic competitions designed to showcase student skills and test mastery of those skills in a public venue.

School Environment of Belonging: JESA was framed as a school environment conducive to a "feeling of belonging." Four of the participants described a school environment that had allowed them to create and foster friendships. One participant explained that these were "the longest relationships [he] had ever had." Carson expressed that he had moved around a great deal during his elementary and middle school years and regarded the four years spent at JESA as a point of pride. The opportunity to refer to JESA as his "home school" and to be able to say that he attended for the full four years was viewed as an accomplishment.

Four of the student participants openly discussed the importance of peer relationships at JESA, framing them as uniquely valuable and meaningful relationships. Howard depicted himself as "a Joker with lots of friends," indicating the relational aspect of having friends and being involved socially had not suffered under any perceived racial constraints. The interview with other student participants supported this theme. Two participants referred to their friends as being as close as family, describing bonds that opened the door to communication and acceptance. One participant stated, "My friends are like my family." Another participant described his relationships with peers as developing new facets as they moved through the academic years, stating that they had "become close and [grown] with one another." The participants indicated not only deep, personal relationships, but also expressed an arc of change among their friends and in them as they navigated the academic years of high school together. Four participants

indicated that such growth occurred as a result of the specialties, the competitions, and the clubs. Clubs allowed students to not only build their college resume, but also to connect with yet another like-minded group of students. Elliot illustrated the importance of this, saying that his choice of friends impacted who he had become as a person. He expressed a belief that exposure to ethnic diversity at JESA allowed for individuality minus the constraints.

The student participants whose narratives included personal insight into issues of self-esteem and peer relationships, depicted a social setting that had allowed them to adopt more authentic individual identities. This freedom to live authentically within the JESA school culture was framed along two lines. The first was a school culture that embraced diversity and allowed students the latitude to not only accept their own ethnic contribution to the school, but also reach beyond past boundaries to connect with students of other ethnicities in ways that reinforced their shared journey. One participant said that he had made friends from different ethnicities who just liked the same things that he did. He went on to explain that his friends genuinely wanted to know more about his culture and his life. This connection with students of other backgrounds who demonstrated not only willingness, but also an authentic interest in the African American culture was repeated throughout the student participant narratives and distinguished as the standard among the student population with few exceptions.

The second insight from the student participants was reflected in their dis-identification with what they viewed as the stereotypical behavior of African American students at other schools. This dis-identification with what they perceived as “stigmatized personas” led to a more genuine and productive relationship with their teachers and peers.

One participant spoke about his past school, saying that he viewed the “typical school” now as filled with students who “preferred to stand out in a negative way.” Carson made the distinction that JESA, with minor exceptions, did not have students who brought that kind of negativity to school. From the interview, it was clear that the participant viewed these students as those who created problems for themselves and for the schools that they attended, distancing himself by denouncing those behaviors as negative and by specifying that they attended “other schools”. Other student participants also distanced themselves from this particular aspect of negative social behaviors. One participant admitted to feeling “embarrassed when a fight breaks out between [African American students] . . . and [he] feels like, “why?”

Results for Combined Research Question 3

How and why was JESA successful with academic engagement of its African American male students? All of the participants in the study portrayed a school culture built upon the foundation of student responsibility and engagement in personal success, relating the significance of this their self-esteem on their academic endeavors. That culture of success was created by the leadership of an administration guided to supporting students in achieving academic and personal success. Implementing and continually cultivating a learning environment centered upon the tenets of personal and academic success, the entire framework supported engagement in a professional learning community. Through instructional methods that applied collaboration best practices, teachers created classrooms that reflected the common standard of shared and individual responsibility for learning under the guidance of supportive staff. Academic success was comprised of two main points for the student participants at JESA: the attainment of

grades that reflected both their ability and their best effort as well as the application of personal accountability and good classroom behavior. Therefore, the combination of the students' participation in their academics and the relationships with the teachers and staff produced a positive educational outcome for these students, allowing them to meet their academic goals.

Teacher relationships contributed to success. All of the participants identified the teachers as their first source of support for their academic efforts. Teacher support took various forms; teachers offered tutorials, re-teaching of concepts, and individual attention during class time to ensure mastery. The student participants stressed the significance of teacher support, contending that such support was the norm for JESA. One student described what he regarded as common practice at JESA for teachers, saying teachers "work one on one with you, and they will try to… cheer you on, telling you that you can do good, and don't give up on yourself and… you don't want to be quitter."

Students' perception of teachers as committed advocates and mentors emerged throughout the interviews. Howard described an academic setting where teachers helped students set goals that led to achievement. One of the key aspects that he discussed was how the teachers transferred ownership of the goals to the students, acting in the capacity of facilitators rather than directors of learning. When he encountered any obstacles, he said that teachers would direct him to resources and pose suggestions, but stipulate that he fix the problem. Four of the students offered similar reflections that supported student and teacher relationships that contributed to and supported student motivation. The use of an online communication site that allowed teachers to connect with students served as a positive motivating factor. One student described it as a "kind of like Facebook" where

teachers shared messages or support and personal reminders to individual students, contributing to a "more social" academic setting that generated more meaningful relationships between students and teachers.

Teachers were depicted as reassuring, relaxed, and professional in their relationships with the students. One of the most positive aspects of the interviews was the ongoing confirmation that teachers offered to the students as they pursued their academic careers. One participant pointed to targeted teacher interaction "teachers here are very respectful here." The teacher participants described the importance of that relational aspect in their individual approaches to students. Rachelle related that she made a point of treating her students fairly and equitably; the result of her teaching philosophy was that the students worked harder for her because she made it clear that their individual needs were a key focus for her. This approach contributed not only to student success, but also influenced the atmosphere of the classroom. Rachelle described her class as a "warm environment." This teacher participant present an approach to teaching that incorporated many of the collaboration tools that facilitated learning. As students worked in groups, they were offered the opportunity to collaborate, construct answers, move about the room, and respond to the teacher's immediate feedback as they constructed their own learning. Rachelle described this approach as resulting in engaged, positive student classroom behavior.

The participants identified the importance of the role of responsibility as a tenet of the school culture. The student participants' perception of responsibility in the school culture was intertwined with academics and behavior. They understood that they had a duty to ask questions and attend tutoring in order to be academically successful. One

student described his own views on personal accountability, saying that students "don't have anybody to basically hold [their] hand here and [they] have to do everything on your own." All of the participant interviews illustrated that JESA students embraced their role in their own academic success. One student discussed a feeling of freedom at the school in spite of greater responsibility. He explained that he felt like he was his own person there, in spite of the rules, and did feel "caged in" by the added responsibility. In fact, the students universally agreed that the added student responsibility resulted in a more professionally oriented student body with fewer behavioral issues and negativity. One student described how the focus on self-reliance and goal-oriented behavior resulted in a student body directed towards a shared, positive purpose.

However, responsibility was not only limited to academic success. Responsibility was exhibited through a tangible "trust card," a card given to student for turning in work on time, completing assignments, refraining from conflict, and presenting a professional image to their peers. The holder of a "trust card" was allowed to listen to music in class and made to "feel more independent," according to one participant.

The school focus towards specialization allowed the students both insight into their preferred career path and preparation for that career. The participants expressed that this particular component of the educational program drew them to the academy.

Insight Into and Preparation for Career: "They help me prepare for it. I haven't actually worked so hard to actually achieve anything else."

Carson illustrated that the school had "shown [him] that [he] can present [himself]… above par of what society expects of [him]." In contrast to traditional schools, Walter noted that "You don't learn as much as you would if you were not in an academy because

they actually prepare you." Ron spoke about the significance of access to technology in his academic career at JESA. He described the project that he was currently engaged in and delineated how having a green screen was necessary in order to complete the project successfully. He contended that other schools provided fewer tools to their students. He described the benefit of his hands-on use of those technology tools in his career preparation. In fact, he believed that being a student at the academy provided him a career boost because of the technology tools. He concluded that other schools lacked the tools that were needed to prepare students for his field, determining that "[students] don't learn as much as [they] would . . . because [the technology academy] actually prepares you." It was clear that this participant had internalized a self-efficacy based on both his use and his mastery of the tools that he viewed as instrumental in his future success.

All participants shared a respect for JESA and the education that it had afforded them. Not one of the participants indicated a dislike for school or a desire to quit school. Every participant spoke with eagerness about the prospect of graduating. Indeed, every participant listed graduation as main goal when asked to discuss their personal goals, and all of the student participants articulated a belief that the teaching staff was personally invested in their individual success.

Personal accountability. One of the structural aspects of JESA was the imperative that each student take personal responsibility for his or her own academic success. While the teachers provided mentoring, re-teaching, and individualized learning goals, the other half of that equation was an insistence upon personal accountability for behavior and grades. Two of the student participants illustrated this point when they discussed how the teachers and staff expected students to behave in and out of the

classroom. Howard and the other students made it clear that teachers told students when their behavior was not in agreement with the standards. One of the points that was offered by the student participants in relation to this theme was that the structure for behavioral expectations was already in place in JESA. Therefore, the students were well aware of the ways in which they were expected to conduct themselves and to perform academically. Rather than an institutional framework in which each teacher was charged with outlining their own expectations and communicating those to individual classes, JESA held institution-wide, clearly defined, well-communicated academic and behavioral standards that left no gray area for student or staff interpretation. The student participants indicated that the entire student body understood these standards. Elliot described the expectation as one in which students were expected to “be on point with everything.” This illustrated the degree to which the students were called to perform well, both behaviorally as well as in their coursework.

Teachers were active in both demanding and facilitating individual accountability from the student participants. To assist in this end, teachers structured learning to be more student-directed. All teacher participants described an approach to curriculum that incorporated collective learning strategies such as classroom discussion, questioning, sharing, and team activities. This approach to teaching transferred the responsibility for learning, and often the selecting of content, back onto their students. When students fell short in their personal goals, teachers stepped in to offer redirection and support. Allissa described her approach as one that helped students develop with individualized plans based on their needs, and required the students to accept personal accountability for designing and implementing their own strategy for success.

Personal success was framed as a concept that extended beyond grades and academics. The teachers, staff, and students understood that student success was based on a student's willing participation to accept responsibility for and actively engage in learning the content, monitoring their performance, and adjusting their approach when required. The end result was a student population described by all the student participants as one in which it was "all right to become successful." Given the tools, the positive school culture, the staff support, and the encouraging behavioral framework for success, the students understood that there was nothing in play that hindered their achievement.

Summary

The participants willingly and openly shared their individual journey to success over the course of the interview process. Though individual participants had struggled with circumstances of poverty, displacement due to disaster, battle with alcohol addiction, and concerns regarding past academic achievements, they each expressed a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment in spite of issues that in the researcher's experience considered obstacles to academic success. The factors unique to JESA in helping the participants realize academic success were consistent across all of the participant responses. The responses from the teachers ran parallel to the student participation responses, validating the themes that emerged from the student participant interviews. The researcher found the resultant themes, powerful in their simplicity, aligned perfectly with educational best practices and uncovered a strength in the approach of JESA that met the needs of the African American male, facilitating academic success. A further benefit, not hypothesized by the researcher, was the resounding gratitude that the recipients verbalized for the support they received in creating their own sense of

professional and personal identity, removed from the stigmatized racial structures, and afforded them the opportunity to see themselves as worthwhile, unique, and capable individuals. Perhaps even more than the response to the academic growth and professional preparation, the student participants expressed an undisputed ownership of their self-worth and efficacy, apart from race, family, and peers. Further study of this educational paradigm has the capacity to positively affect the trajectory of education for this marginalized population.

Chapter Five: Summary and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to examine the high academic performance of African American males in one of the most academically successful high schools in the state, Jack E. Singley Academy in Irving, TX. Given the success this school experienced with African American males, the researcher believed it was important to investigate how this high school was effectively preparing its African American male students for academic success. The underlying question regarding how this school prepared its African American males for success in the face of national data that highlighted the overwhelming odds against which this demographic struggles. Battling an 18% unemployment rate among African American men not incarcerated, the staggering rate of 50% unemployment among those without a high school degree spoke to the desperate need to evaluate the critical issue of how these young men were being educated ("Black unemployment: Not so colour-blind", 2009, para. 2).

Past research advanced the belief that African American males recognized the public educational system as one organized and coordinated by Whites, seeing little or no economic or personal benefit from cooperation within that structure (Irving & Hudley, 2008). Additionally, the job market did not provide a corresponding reimbursement for that education, and the devaluation of education created a shift away from the academic pathway to career and college readiness (Irving & Hudley, 2008). The declining national economic conditions in the years after 2006 emphasized the critical need for a paycheck rather than an education, motivating many African American males to turn to earning a living rather than finishing high school (Few, 2008).

The goal of this research was to determine what factors led to the success of the young African American males at JESA. The discovery of the links between school and classroom culture, student/teacher relationships, best practices in collaborative learning, supportive and structured administration guidelines, professional preparation through mentoring, and relevant training for workforce preparedness created a foundation that fostered academic success. This study exposed shared characteristics, attitudes, and assessments among the participants that led to their internal motivation for success and provided inspiration based on tangible rewards for their active participation in academics. As themes developed during the course of data analysis, startling insights emerged that spoke not only to the positive benefits of the structure of JESA, but also revealed the intensely personal changes that this school had effected on these participants that allowed them to arrive at a new level of ownership for their academic success, their unique personalities, and their hopes for the future.

Discussion of Findings

The research participants were selected for this study based on their ethnicity, their academic achievement, and their current enrollment in JESA. Once the field of participants was established, candidates were chosen through a purposive sampling, resulting in the inclusion of eleven African American participants. The researcher verified their criteria, gathering personal demographic information on each student participant. Participant interviews were then scheduled at such times as to allow ease of location for the participants at JESA while not impacting their seat time in class.

The participants were given the transcript in order to check accuracy and validate the results of the transcription. The focus group discussion generated additional information

and provided a consistency check with the data gleaned from the participant interviews. Themes emerged and information from the literature review was synthesized to allow for the organization and categorization of the data for evaluation.

Findings for Combined Research Question 1: What was the culture at JESA towards academic and personal success for every student?

Marzano (1998) described student engagement as the critical threshold through every student must pass before learning can commence. Without the individual ‘buy in’, of the student, the structural framework of the educational system proved ineffective. The responses from the student participants support this stance. The school culture at JESA was framed on tangible rewards for ‘buy in’ on the part of all the participants. One of the primary reasons underlying dis-identification with academics with the public school system was the belief that there was little or no economic or personal incentive to cooperate in the system. The student participants at JESA detailed an overwhelmingly positive identification with academics, the school culture, and the ongoing educational goals. Individually and as a group, they described a school culture in which they felt accepted and valued. Consequently, they were open to the educational process and described their days with emotions ranging from enthusiasm to contentment.

The culture at JESA promoted both personal and academic success of all students. The participant responses reflected a teaching staff that was committed to the academic success of each student, allowing no student to ‘fall through the cracks’ or feel isolated and without academic support. On the contrary, each student participant detailed ongoing and focused interaction by the teachers with regards to student achievement, relating the personal pride the that the teachers felt in their success. Additionally, each of the teacher

participants confirmed this stance through their responses on the questionnaires, detailing it as a top priority and one of the key tenets of their teaching philosophy.

Further analysis of the school culture illustrated a culture of personal acceptance whereby each student felt not only free, but also encouraged, to live as their authentic self. Many of the participants related to feeling a pressure while enrolled in other public schools to participate in a way that they described as ethnically ‘stereotypical’, describing the environment as one in which they felt pressured to behave in ways that were not indicative of their true beliefs and values. This pressure was situational and impacted their education and their self-esteem. The participants described the atmosphere of JESA as liberating, relating their journey towards a more positive view of themselves with the same weight as their appreciation of the academic culture. Though the level of involvement in clubs, organizations, and education differed, the participants all ascribed primary importance to their academic success at JESA. The researcher found that among the participants the commonality of inclusion in the school culture contributed to their personal and academic success. For a few of the participants, their tenure at JESA represented the first time they had been afforded the opportunity to build and foster meaningful peer and professional relationships. The importance of these relationships to both their self-esteem and their academic pursuits was made clear through the interviews. These connections allowed many of the participants to forge meaningful relationships within their specialties that enhanced their academic careers and boosted their self-esteem. Not one participant entertained the notion of dropping out of school or not completing high school. Their shared goal to finish high school was reinforced by the

certainty that a support and teaching staff was readily available and proactive in helping them achieve this goal.

One facet of the findings regarding the school culture defied easy categorization. While all of the participants described a school culture in which they had a valued place, the extent of their inclusion varied. A few of the participants depicted a setting wherein they were almost universally accepted and esteemed. Other participants described variations on this that ranged from universal acceptance to acceptance within an ethnically diverse, smaller group of students. Only one participant described his inclusion as an acceptance into a group comprised almost solely of African Americans. In fact, all but one of the participants depicted a school culture that sought to include and value all ethnicities. The driving force behind this dynamic, as illustrated by the student interviews, was the shift from traditional high school structure to a focused, professional setting: primary importance was placed on preparation for college through professionalism and career planning, reducing or excluding the activities and drama that typified the more traditional high school setting. Therefore, the atmosphere of the entire school created a shared, strategic focus in which every student, teacher, and administrator was viewed as a stakeholder. The student participants' willing engagement with the educational system at JESA aligns with the findings of Marzano's (1998) investigation into the 'self-system'. The student participants at JESA were provided the opportunity to create a belief system that included a positive self- concept, an easy acceptance by one or more supportive peer groups, a friendly academic environment, and situational efficacy in both the academic fields and the mentoring preparation. The students created new

views of themselves as both valued members of a professional group and as competent, goal-oriented learners.

The academic culture created by JESA, supported by the teaching staff, and adopted by the student body established clear and specific expectations for academic and personal performance. The teacher participants who completed the questionnaires described the teaching atmosphere as one built upon comprehensive and exhaustive training in the background knowledge necessary to support this educational framework within the classroom. In fact, the overarching tenets of the school shaped both atmosphere and academics. The teachers were as committed to support the overall goals of JESA as they were to the individual students. The staff recognized that their coordinated efforts created a uniformity of rules and expectations from class to class that afforded a safe and recognized structure for students. This general compliance with rules and expectations paired conduct and academics as a component of school culture. The research revealed another key finding noted in both the interviews and the questionnaires; students knew what was expected of them. Furthermore, the students said without hesitation that any teacher could step in to correct them; the rules and expectations were universally understood and uniformly enforced and any behavioral inconsistencies were addressed immediately

Findings for Combined Research Question 2: How were African American males engaged at this school academically and socially?

Marzano (2006) noted that individuals engage at different levels and in varying ways both academically and socially. Consequently, the evaluation of the student participants revealed a wide range of academic and social participation. The analysis of

the data did reveal common characteristics among the participants that contributed to or enabled their engagement. Each of the participants related the importance of the school's focus on specialties as an important aspect in their social and academic engagement. The participants described the significance of this differentiation into organized learning communities. The consensus among the participants was that the areas of specialty created unique learning communities. These divisions by academic focus also drew in prospective students who sought out JESA for the opportunity to work with specialized programs, software, and technology that were not readily available on other more traditional campuses. The access to technology and the fast track to career preparedness encouraged the students to participate more fully in their academics as the payoff was viewed as almost certain employment or college enrollment upon graduation.

Many of the participants visited the school the year previous to their entrance and were treated to a, hands-on opportunity to explore the various specialties and choose one that matched their personal goals, their individual tastes, and their abilities. The researcher believed this threshold of choice based on relevance and preparation for a career, created immediate value for this educational opportunity with which they were presented. The participants viewed themselves as members of a culture aligned to their goals and one that supported their academic needs. Therefore, the engagement of the participants at the academic level was one that focused on the goal of graduating in order to move into their chosen career path. The level of participation in academics varied among the participants, ranging from a desire to simply achieve graduation to a desire to perform at the highest level possible. This represented a range that the researcher had predicted experiencing throughout the participants. However, many of the participants

discussed feeling a need to excel beyond the norm. The participants who shared this common trait revealed their motivation as twofold: they believed that they had to achieve better grades in order to be viewed as ‘even’ with those students of other ethnicities, and they shared a belief that they ‘owed’ it to their own race to achieve above the norm in order to quash what they referred to as ‘stereotypes’. This was a finding that the researcher had not foreseen, defying easy classification within the categorization. However, its repetition among the participants underscored a shared characteristic that would be worthy of further research.

The participants all voiced identification with a peer group, either in their specialty or in the academic setting, that provided positive reinforcement. Minus the more traditional aspects of sports, the social engagement of JESA centered on the students’ specialties. The inclusion in a group of individuals who shared a common interest, created an opportunity to connect with a diverse group of students who shared an affinity for the participants’ fields of interest. Additionally, the participants traveled and competed against other schools, fostering a sense of inclusion and shared vision within the specialties. The opportunity to join clubs was also seen as a benefit by the participants. The traditional club offerings provided the students the chance to connect with new friends outside their specialty. One student described the clubs as important both socially and academically. For him, the clubs provided a valuable connection to students who sought to achieve at the highest academic level. He viewed those students as his peer group of choice and relished not only the academic rigor he found in the AcDec club, but also the friendly interaction of peers who challenged and supported his high academic goals. Other participants described their social lives as so intertwined with

school that they viewed their school friends as an extended family. This broad and supportive peer group provided them with many opportunities to access people to whom they felt they could relate when the need arose.

The interviews of the student participants revealed a sense of gratitude on the part of all of the participants for their inclusion in what they viewed as a professional community. Each of the participants expressed a willingness to join this school community, and they witnessed the benefits of JESA within their lives and the lives of others. The participants engaged in the school culture through active involvement and willing compliance with the more stringent rules of JESA. Students dressed professionally on designated days and comported themselves in a disciplined, mature manner. The willingness to 'buy in' to the more structured and rigorous rules and expectations of JESA created an academic and social atmosphere in which the students truly felt increasingly successful and productive. In fact, the overwhelming tone of the participant interviews was one of personal empowerment and preparedness.

Seen in this light, the relevance of the school culture upon individual student engagement became clearer. A school culture based upon shared expectations and in which the individual is valued, fostered a student body that was individually and collectively invested in the success of the school. Three of the participants made this connection and explained the importance they placed upon being role models for the younger students and in representing their school in public through their professional and well-mannered behavior. This campus climate composed of students who viewed themselves as assets to a learning community clarified the necessity for an inclusive and cooperative educational environment. Slavin (1990) detailed the positive effects that

might be affected with such a learning environment. However, the researcher discovered an even deeper and more profoundly personal empowerment that was achieved within this educational framework, realizing progress well beyond the desired academic goals. The common characteristic among the participants was their certainty that they could and would transfer this new level of social comfort and confidence on job interviews, as the complete their college applications, and pursue careers in the future.

Findings for Combined Research Question 3: How and why was JESA successful with academic engagement of its African American male students?

The specialties at JESA provided a framework of collaborative learning groups that mimicked the workplace environments in many regards. This environment of positive group interaction was detailed by Slavin and Karweit (1984) as critical in creating a successful learning environment for the African American male. In the specialties, students were expected to engage in a learning framework that incorporated various ethnicities, including a variety of learning abilities, and promoted positive interaction by self-directed learners, all necessary skills of the 21st century knowledge workers (Drucker, 2001).

Another key finding was a positive association with the academic standards required by JESA. Though the participants achieved at various levels of academic accomplishment, all of the participants voiced a clear understanding of the importance of their academic careers as well as an appreciation for the opportunity that they felt had been afforded to them to participate in a setting that they perceived would truly prepare them for the workplace. This characteristic motivated each of the participants to keep abreast of their grades, actively seeking out the individual teachers with whom they

needed to connect for tutorials or makeup work in order to pass or result in a better grade. The teacher participants who completed the questionnaires all listed student engagement as one of the primary reasons for their choice to teach at JESA. Teacher participant responses detailed an educational framework that facilitated and promoted active student engagement in academics. Through Facebook-like communications with the students, teacher connection was facilitated and friendly. Reminders and individual messages of encouragement provided students with ongoing support from all teachers. In keeping with the findings of Irving and Hudley (2008) the students at JESA found an establishment that was clean, well-funded, well-equipped with the latest technology, and staffed with teachers and administrators who were immediately responsive to the needs of all of the students, regardless of ethnicity.

The creation of a positive identification with academics was based on engagement in a system that supported their individual needs while remaining sensitive to their cultural and personal needs as well. The result was an active engagement from this group of African American males that had enabled them to succeed academically and integrate into a school culture that provided a place for them to explore their unique gifts and personalities among like-minded individuals. Schunck (1973) indicated that such a climate produced the best results for meeting individual student goals. This high level of engagement, permitting students to structure learning around their own interests, produced learning environments in which all of the participants felt engaged in the educational process.

The researcher found the common task among the participants of strategic goal-setting. Part of the academic preparation of JESA consisted of tutorials, goal-setting,

and personal responsibility regarding academics and behavior. Most of the participants revealed the involvement of a teacher, at one or more times, who had guided them in the practice of taking personal responsibility for their education. Illustrating examples that ranged from parent communication to tutorials, the interviews depicted a school culture in which the teaching staff was integral in student mentoring and monitoring of learning. In contrast to more traditional school settings, anonymity was virtually impossible at JESA; participants described a teaching staff that was so involved in the personal success of each student that one teacher would know if a student was failing in another class and seek that student out to discuss the issue and strategize possible solutions.

The participants acknowledged that such a level of staff support could help them reach even higher, achieving graduation where it had not seemed possible before. Three students described personal circumstances that might have precluded high school graduation had they not been enrolled in the more individualized learning environment. All of the participants recounted an educational climate in which both the words and the actions of the teaching staff revealed a commitment to the personal success of each student, without exception. However, a reciprocal and equally demanding obligation was placed on the students for accepting and following through on their academic and behavioral responsibilities. The atmosphere of a well-mannered student body was consistent from hallway to classroom. The research by Estes (2004) detailed the positive results of this collaborative learning environment. Both student and teacher participants in this study described classrooms that hinged on a positive learning environment comprised of lively discussion and active student involvement.

Recommendations

The nation as a whole, and Texas in particular, increasingly focused on data and student performance through standardized testing. The legal, political, financial, and professional resources expended in the pursuit of raising the percentage points on the national demographic spreadsheet for English and Algebra constituted billions of federal and state dollars and affected negligible change in the past five years (Darling-Hammond, 2007a, p. 260). The researcher believed the increasingly desperate response of administrations across the state proved fruitless in creating meaningful and lasting results. Applying more focus to an area that had not provided reciprocal rewards for the over 40 billion dollars in aid would suggest that this was perhaps not the source of the problem (Darling-Hammond, 2007a, p. 254). Turning once more to view the encouraging results of one school that affected change spoke to the necessity of reevaluating the structural framework of schools classrooms in an attempt to center energy and resources on creating an academic and social climate that fostered the academic success of the African American males. The interviews with the participants in this study reiterated the importance of a positive and caring social setting for all students. Before instruction began, students knew that the teachers who were guiding them, the classmates with whom they were engaging in discussion, and that the peers they counted on for support and interaction all valued them based on criteria other than ethnicity. Movement towards such a learning environment would promote both academic achievement and cultural sensitivity as students incorporated their background and experiences in an environment of safe participation (Darling-Hammond, 2000).

The data from Darling-Hammond's (2000) study illustrated the positive results and successful outcomes for these participants at JESA. Additional data from schools similarly situated would contribute to helping inform curriculum and education choices regarding this marginalized demographic. Though the exact study may not be duplicated based on limited choices of such institutions, additional studies may reveal similarities or gather supplementary data that contributes to understanding educational strategies that contribute to success. The data gathered in this study found commonalities among the participants in spite of differences in ability, background, and socioeconomics. Additional research between genders might further inform the academic question and add value to the current research. Past research found distinct differences between the genders and their educational attainment that may prove significant when applied to this group in particular through comparison of academic attainment. This study sought to reveal only the underlying factors for academic success of this group of African American males at JESA; resulting in yet another aspect that remains unexplored - the academic success of all ethnicities and genders within such an educational framework, adding another facet to the interaction of school culture, academics, and best practices in collaborative learning to the available research.

Conclusion

The conclusions of this research were illustrated with clarity through this group of young African American males who were provided with opportunity, support, and an academic learning community established on and driven by the tenets of individual empowerment, professional, and personal ambitions. The students who sought out and were willing participants in this school culture became active and valued members of a

community that supported their academic goals through a dedicated teaching staff who had themselves been instructed in training students to understand and accept their own role in learning. From individual internalization of academic goals and behavioral expectations to campus-wide norms and rules, membership in this community was viewed by the participants with respect and gratitude. To clarify, the gift of self-respect that these students felt they had been given by the administrators, counselors, staff, and other students were returned in like measure to the school, the staff, and their peers. The common personal characteristic of this group was a willing involvement in this educational community. Many of the participants either sought the school out for the area of specialty offered or were guided there by a parent or family member. The findings of this research clarified, regardless of intellectual capacity, all of these individuals were capable of achieving success that culminated in high school graduation. Despite circumstances that ran from upheaval due to Hurricane Katrina, an educational history punctuated by continued moves, cognitive challenges, and the challenges of past alcoholism and drug addiction, the standards set within this educational community called upon the students to willingly rise to a high level. With a supporting structure, that level of academic achievement was readily available to all of the students. The researcher concluded that the school culture, created on this framework, afforded a positive learning community. Concentrating on what was defined by past studies as the critical areas of need when tackling the issue of education of the African American males, this school successfully answered with education by design, focusing on delivering relevant, meaningful, and targeted content in a liberating atmosphere that valued individuality,

including cultural differences with an appreciation for their associative worth, rather than as a tool of division and isolation.

The researcher concluded that duplication of this framework is possible. Though this would not promote an identical approach for every school, this study identified specific procedures that could be replicated in the educational system to achieve similar results. Though the same approach would not benefit every school, this targeted method of education for the demographic with which such changes might produce positive results could contribute to informing professional development and promoting school culture at other schools. This approach offered additional opportunities for customization of programs in the educational system that utilized collaborative learning and the framework discussed here to develop a focus that met the needs of their struggling student demographics. Balancing knowledge, results, and planning with an eye towards empowering our most marginalized groups calls for reevaluating the traditional structure that has, thus far, succeeded in furthering only the disillusionment of African American males with the traditional public education system.

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Vitae

Demarius J. Howard earned a Bachelor's of Arts in Psychology from the Eastern Illinois University, Charleston, IL in 2005. He completed a Masters of Arts in School Counseling during Fall, 2007, and an Educational Specialist Degree in Spring, 2010; both from Lindenwood University, Saint Charles, MO. At the time of this writing, Demarius is a doctoral candidate with an anticipated graduation date of May, 2015. Previous experience includes eight years of K- 12 counseling experience in public education. Demarius is certified and Highly Qualified in the states of Illinois, Missouri, and Texas. During his time in education, he received numerous recognitions: Superintendent Seal for Irving ISD Parental Involvement; United States House Representative Recognition Certificate from Congressman Pete Sessions, 2012; and the 2011 Education Ambassador for Parent Step A Head. He was the recipient of the Ambassador's Trip, Washington D.C., 2011 and 2013; Presidential Inauguration Invitation and Washington D.C. Trip, 2013; and Texas Congress of PTA Life Time Member Recipient, 2011. Lastly, Demarius received the Irving ISD Counselor Certificate of Special Recognition and Certificate of Recognition from College Board [Advanced Placement, AP].

Demarius' next venture is A-Gallery, a school built upon mentoring black male students to success; the 'A' in A-Gallery simply means Achievement. In our society the achievements of many minorities, specifically African are often not seen positively portrayed. A-Gallery will serve to change this stigma through the use of new relevant instructional strategies, mentoring, and creative technology as the driving force for motivating it learners to achieve socially, emotionally, and academically. With the use of web-based instruction, face-to-face mentors, and community project-based exposure, A-

Gallery's captivating programs will aid students to success by establishing an environment that fosters unique individualization and provides safety, honesty, trust, and respect for the dignity of all people.