

AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE ADMINISTRATORS AND THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF THE
FRESHMAN TRANSITION EXPERIENCE FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES: A
COLLECTIVE CASE STUDY

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DEDICATION

This work was only possible because of the hard work and sacrifice of those who came before me. I dedicate this dissertation to the long line of ancestors who fought for our nation, our freedoms, and my ability to pursue my education. I further dedicate this work to my parents who instilled in me the value and absolute necessity of education, ethics, and hard work.

ABSTRACT

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Purpose

Despite the difficulties students encounter during the freshman transition, the phenomenon remains an understudied topic in education. The purpose of this collective case study was to gain an understanding of the Grade 8 to Grade 9 transition experience for African American male students in one suburban school district. Furthermore, this research sought to determine what programs and procedures could be put in place to aide African American males in their transition to high school. It is important to understand how African American males are impacted by the freshman transition because the statistical data indicates that they are the group most likely to drop out of school and are doing so at disturbing rates. Additionally, African American males are the sub population most adversely impacted by the economic conditions associated with not having a high school diploma. As such, Critical Race Theory served as the conceptual framework of this study.

Method

Four African American male administrators participated in this collective case study and data were collected using face-to-face interviews conducted in person and via Zoom. In an effort to add African American male administrators' voices to the literature, In Vivo coding was utilized. Therefore, an important stakeholder group has been added to the freshman transition literature. To triangulate the data gathered from the participants, data were also gathered from school counselors. The counselors who

completed an online questionnaire were employed at schools where a participant/administrator worked.

Findings

The participants identified *positive adult relationships* and *connectedness* as vital to their own successes during the freshman transition. In regard to programs and procedures that would benefit contemporary African American male students during the freshman transition, three themes emerged from the data. The participants believed that establishing a *mentor* program would benefit African American male students during the freshman transition. They also believed that *training* and *connectedness* were important factors for the success of African American male students.

KEY WORDS: Freshman transition, African American, Male students, Case study, Mentor, High school, Interviews, In Vivo coding

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Background of Study

Every fall, as schools resume in the United States, a group of students begins the final stage of their K-12 journey in public schools. The transition from middle school to high school is one of great anticipation and excitement (Geltner et al., 2011). Students begin to experience increased options at school with more choices in co- and extracurricular activities, including fine arts, athletics, and other clubs (Clark et al., 2016). Additionally, for many students, the beginning of high school coincides with more freedom and increased responsibility at home (Jindal-Snape, 2016). Many students struggle in their ninth-grade year, however. With all of the changes that new high school students experience at home and at school, some students' anticipation turns into anxiousness, and their excitement soon morphs into apathy and discontentment (Andrews & Bishop, 2012). Instead of their freshman year serving as a launching pad for this next chapter in their educational career, for far too many students the transition becomes a stumbling block. The challenges faced by these students can lead to not passing classes and falling behind their peers (Neild, 2009).

Typically, the promotion to ninth grade necessitates a physical move to a new building. Additionally, the transition to high school involves new teachers, new routines, and new academic and social expectations. Historically, African American students have not been taught how to meet the new challenges they will face (Muhammad, 2020) in high school. As an educator, I have witnessed the persistence of this historical trend as students who have not been taught what is necessary to succeed continue to struggle with

the increased rigor in the classroom that is compounded by poor time management skills and social skills that have not been fully developed. In too many instances, some students never make it out of the starting blocks and make the decision to drop out of school. These problems seem to be compounded for students who are members of ethnic/racial minority groups that have been historically disenfranchised, and the potential ramifications for these students are ominous.

Dropping out of school has been linked to a number of negative consequences that will affect a person's entire life (Hickman et al., 2008). Many of these ramifications will disproportionately affect students of color, in particular African American male students. As will be discussed in the literature review, heightened levels of unemployment (DePaoli et al., 2015), substance dependency (Kamrath, 2019), and incarceration (Stark & Noel, 2015) are examples of the struggles that some African American males who drop out of high school will encounter.

Problem Statement

The graduation rate in the United States is on the rise and is currently at the highest point recorded (Boyington, 2018; Gewertz, 2019). The National Center for Education Statistics reported that the adjusted graduation rate for the class of 2017 was over 85%. This represents a 6% increase from 2011, the first year that the adjusted cohort graduation rate was measured (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018a). Although this news is encouraging, it still means that approximately 15% of the graduating class failed to meet the minimum requirements for graduation. In the United States, there is still a dropout crisis (Atwell et al., 2019; Heppen et al., 2018).

On average, for African American students, the picture is more grim. For the same year that the national graduation rate was 85% for all races, only 78% of African American students graduated on time (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018b). This percentage puts the graduation rate of African Americans for the class of 2017 lower than all sub-populations measured (e.g., Asian, White, Hispanic) except for Native Americans. Typically, when students do not graduate on time, they quit school—they drop out.

Regarding dropouts, many people have a picture in their mind of a student who is 18 years old, falls a couple of credits short of graduating, and only then decides to quit school. For many students, however, the decision of whether or not they will complete high school is not made when they are almost finished, but rather within the first few weeks of their freshman year of high school (Hertzog & Morgan, 1999). The decision to drop out is made so frequently in the first year of high school that some scholars have begun calling it the “make it or break it year” (Mac Iver et al., 2015).

There has been a significant amount of research conducted demonstrating a decline in academic attainment during educational transitions (Jindal-Snape, 2016). Some students find the transition to high school to be challenging and stressful (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Cushman, 2005; Jindal-Snape & Ingram, 2013) and as a result the academic regression seems to be especially noticeable when students encounter this critical transition. Consequently, many students are retained in their freshman year (Wheelock & Miao, 2005).

This experience is not unique to the United States; it is a global occurrence. Alexander (2010) reported difficulty for students transitioning to secondary schools

across Europe and in Tasmania. Alexander and others have helped solidify the necessity of research into students' transition into their high school setting.

Furthermore, the transition affects African American male students more than other groups of students. Orrock and Clark (2018) noted that young African American males experienced obstacles that contributed to a growing gap in academic achievement and dropout rates when compared to their White peers. Additionally, researchers (Roderick, 2003; Schneiderman, 2020) showed a decline in academic performance among African American male students when compared to their African American female counterparts during the transition to high school.

Differences in performance among groups of students have been noted in standardized test data. A recent analysis of standardized test data revealed statistically significant differences between the performance of African American and Hispanic students on Grade 9 standardized tests in Texas (Fraga & Slate, 2020). Hispanic students outperformed African American students on eight out of the nine performance indicators analyzed. Because of the many challenges outlined in this section, more information is needed to address these challenges experienced by some African American males as they transition to high school.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this collective case study was to gain an understanding of the Grade 8 to Grade 9 transition experience for African American male students in one suburban school district. The intent was to gather data from African American male school administrators who have experience as former students and current educators. These educators possessed valuable perspectives in their roles as school leaders, mentors

to students, and former students of the high school transition experience. Participants were asked to recall their own transition to high school, consider the transition for contemporary African American male students, discuss their perceptions of the transition experiences of these students, and compare their views of the transition to that of other groups of students. Through this study, I focused on male students who are African American. Conclusions were drawn about the freshman transition experience. Suggestions were offered, as to how educators can better support some African American male students during their transition to high school.

Significance of the Study

There is a plethora of research on student transitions from high school to college or to the work force. The middle school to high school transition, however, is understudied (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013; Hertzog & Morgan, 1998; Smith et al., 2006). There is research on the transition from middle school to high school; however, most of the current literature involving this transition focuses on school programs and analysis of transition programs. Although the programs offered at the study school will be discussed with the study participants, this research will be focused on the students in transition.

Initial research uncovered one dissertation on a similar topic; however, the research did not focus on a specific ethnicity, race, or gender (Dudley, 2012). It is important to understand how African American males are impacted by the freshman transition because the statistical data indicates that they are the group most likely to drop out of school and are doing so at disturbing rates (Smith et al., 2011). Additionally, African American males are the group most adversely impacted by the economic

conditions associated with not having a high school diploma (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019; National Center for Education Statistics, 2018b).

Furthermore, the voice of African American male administrators about the transition experience was not found in the current literature at the time of this dissertation. As educators who have personally experienced the freshman transition as African American males, their experiences proved to be an important step towards understanding the educational strengths and challenges of African American male students today. Adding administrator voices to the current literature will help fill a gap in the literature.

In addition to a gap in current literature, this study can be used by practitioners to guide current practices. If educators are serious about ensuring the success of all students, then it is imperative they understand the challenges faced by all of the students in their schools, in particular those who struggle the most and are at the greatest risk of non-completion. This study can be used by district and campus administrators as well as teachers to implement policies and procedures that could aide freshmen in their transition to high school.

Policymakers may also be able to benefit from this study. Currently, high school freshmen in Texas take two or three End-of-Course examinations, depending on the requirements of their school district. These examinations are required for graduation in Texas public schools (Texas Education Agency, 2020). This testing is one example of an educational policy that directly affects students in this transition as they are beginning their high school career. Legislators might want to review the results of this study and consider potential consequences of this policy.

Conceptual Framework

The purpose of this case study is to gain an understanding of the Grade 8 to Grade 9 transition experience for African American male students as told by African American male administrators. A conceptual framework guides the focus of the research topic (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Given the purpose, I will utilize Critical Race Theory (CRT) as the framework for this research.

CRT compiles ideas taken from the Civil Rights movement and ethnic studies (Gillborn, 2015) and includes factors such as slavery, Jim Crow, and school segregation (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Rector-Aranda (2016) noted “CRT advocates for the disenfranchised who have not been see as unique individuals due to [the] constructions of race” (p. 3).

As it pertains to education and this research effort, CRT juxtaposes the historical realities of racism and oppression with the contemporary struggles that African American male students face in schools today. CRT further asserts that racism, not necessarily by the individual but systemically, has been normalized (Rector-Aranda, 2016). That is, CRT asserts that racism is embedded in the institutions of the United States.

Related to the current study, CRT can be used to understand the transition experience for African American males. For example, as presented in Chapter IV, one of the participants in the study discussed a specific example of implicit bias in the curriculum at his daughter’s school. Additionally, racial inequities can be seen by the persistence of a gap in academic achievement and regression during the freshman transition.

Definition of Key Terms

In this section, terminology that was used throughout this dissertation will be defined. Some of these terms, without proper operationalization, are ambiguous. Other terms have different meanings depending on the country or state that is being investigated. For these reasons, definitions have been provided for clarity to the reader.

Administrator. In order to be an administrator in Texas, an individual must have taught for at least three years, have attained a master's degree, and hold valid teaching and principal certifications. Positions typically considered administrators are principal, associate principal, dean, and assistant (vice) principal.

At-risk. In Texas, a student is considered at-risk if they are under the age of 26 and meets one of 13 criteria or determined to be in danger of not graduating, and is thus labeled *at-risk* (Texas Education Code § 29.081)

Drop out. For the purpose of this research, a drop out is someone who is not enrolled in school and has not earned a high school diploma or the equivalent (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002).

Freshman Transition. For the purpose of this research, freshman transition will refer to the experience of entering Grade 9 for the first time, typically from a middle school or junior high school into a high school setting.

Research Questions

In this research, I sought to answer the following questions:

1. What perceptions do African American male high school administrators have of the freshman transition for contemporary African American male students?

2. What perceptions do African American male middle school administrators have of the freshman transition for contemporary African American male students?

3. What do African American male administrators believe will support African American male students with the freshman transition?

Delimitations

This study was bounded by some delimitations. First, the focus was on capturing the voices of African American male administrators. As such, each participant was an African American male. Second, each participant was employed as an administrator at a school in the study district at the time of the study. Although students of other races experience this same transition, the focus of this study will be on the perceptions that African American male administrators have of the freshman transition for contemporary African American male students. These delimitations were made so that the central focus of the study would be to capture the voices of administrators regarding the freshman transition for African American male students.

Limitations

Limitations refer to those parts of the study that are out of the author's control (Blair, 2016). This study had a number of limiting factors. The primary limitation applied to me as the researcher. As further detailed in Chapter III, I am a White male who will be conducted interviews with, and about, African Americans. Seidman (2013) stated in this regard that race can be a limitation.

Data collection and specifically interviews can pose limitations to a study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Of primary concern is the bias and perspective that each participant brings to the interview (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). That is to say that each

participant has their own unique view about African American males during their transition to high school. Each participant has experienced the transition to high school and there is a great likelihood that they will have each experienced the transition in a different way. The administrators' histories with the freshman transition may affect their perceptions of current students' experiences.

During the data analysis phase, the coding process might pose limitations. As the researcher, I will interpret what was said by the participants and prescribe codes to eventually determine themes (Saldaña, 2016). Methods for addressing the trustworthiness and credibility of this process will be addressed in Chapter III.

Assumptions

A number of assumptions were made in this study. One assumption related to the first limitation is that as a researcher, I could access tools to manage my biases and experiences as a White male studying African American male students. I have described these strategies in Chapter III. Another assumption involves the administrators. I assumed that the administrators have knowledge about the lived experiences of contemporary African American male students related to the transition they make during their freshman year in high school. I further assumed the participants would honestly share their perceptions.

Organization of the Study

In this chapter, an explanation of and justification for this study was presented. After a brief background of the subject matter was discussed, a statement of the problem, a purpose, and a validation of the significance were addressed. Additionally, in this chapter an operationalization of terminology that will be used throughout this paper was

delineated. The research questions and the conceptual framework for the research were offered. In the next chapter, a review of previous works is discussed. In Chapter III, the method for collecting and analyzing data will be presented.

CHAPTER II

Review of Literature

For this research, the review of literature will be categorized into five areas. After an explanation of how this literature review was conducted, an exploration of how the term *transition* has been researched and applied in an academic sense will be presented. This literature review will detail the different lenses for the term *transition*. The second area of examination will be the areas that researchers have detailed as the most challenging perceived barriers for success for students as they transition into high school.

The third area of literature that will be reviewed deals with students dropping out of school in general and with a focus on African American males. Research cited in this review indicated that a poor experience in the first year of high school can lead to a student dropping out of school. As such, it is worth noting the findings that correlate the transition with dropping out in this paper, as well as the reviewing the effects of dropping out. The fourth section of this literature review will discuss transition programs that previous authors have studied.

The fifth and final section of the literature will attempt to review literature relevant to administrators. Because their voice will be captured in this study, it is important to know what previous researchers have learned. A particular focus will be on literature pertaining to the perspectives of African American administrators during the freshman transition.

Method of Search for Literature Review

The majority of the literature that was reviewed for this study was found utilizing databases through Sam Houston State University's library. The primary databases used were *Education Source*, *Educational Resource Information Clearinghouse (ERIC)*, and *Race Relations Abstracts*. The terms *African American*, *Black*, *male*, *freshman transition*, *high school*, *dropout*, and *mentor* were used in the search engine to find results that included academic journal article, national and state level reports, newspaper articles, books, and dissertations.

Once article abstracts were reviewed, the articles were downloaded, stored, and reviewed utilizing the software, Mendeley. An Excel spreadsheet was created to assist with note taking and organization of the literature. After this step the themes previously described in the last section were derived and are presented in this chapter.

Transitions

In research, the term *transition* has been operationalized in a number of ways. The reason for a lack of a cohesive definition can be attributed, in large part, to the fact that there are a number of transitions that human beings will experience throughout their lives. An additional struggle in a unified meaning of transition is that academics analyze transitions from different perspectives. Some analyze single transitional events whereas others research an ongoing process (Jindal-Snape, 2016). Some researches see the human life as a state of constant transitions (Schlossberg, 1981) whereas others compartmentalize and “conceptuali[ze] transition as a single event” (Jindal-Snape, 2016, p. 166).

Some transitions are physical; these transitions include events like becoming mobilized, baby teeth being replaced by permanent teeth, and puberty. Other transitions are tied to location and include life events such as moving, marriage, divorce, or changing jobs. Transitions can also be researched based on the predictability of an event occurring, such as graduation (Evans et al., 1998). One factor that is clear by the volumes of research associated with transitions is that people are concerned with how transitions impact individuals and how individuals deal with transitions (Schlossberg, 1981).

The focus of a transition can be narrowed when the author clearly operationalizes what is being studied. King-Rice (2001) stated an educational transition is “a point at which students move from one segment of the education process to another” (p. 372). Other authors, cited in this chapter, have conducted research on transitions within the field of education. The majority of students will face at least three transitions during their K-12 education in public schools in the United States: entering elementary school, moving from elementary school to middle school, and transitioning from middle school to high school. Some students will encounter a fourth educational transition if they attend a postsecondary institution. Researchers have not factored in transitions that occur for students enrolled in school districts that utilize more levels (e.g., junior high school or a ninth-grade campus), nor does it account for families moving, resulting in the student transitioning to yet another new school.

Elementary school transition. Some research has been focused on the first educational transition that many students face, beginning Kindergarten. Research in this area has focused on the transition for the student (Janus et al., 2007), the transition for the

parent (Jindal-Snape & Hannah, 2014), and the need for teachers and the school as a whole to be prepared for this transitional period (Wolery, 1999). Dupéré et al. (2015) claimed that in addition to family circumstances, early school experiences can have a lasting impact on the educational career of a student, even putting them on path towards dropping out.

Starting Kindergarten comes with a host of complications. For parents experiencing this phenomenon for the first time, a primary difficulty is learning the steps that are required for their child to begin school (Rous et al., 1994). Another factor in the process is the broadening of students' support networks (Janus, 2001), as most elementary schools have larger staffs in comparison to most day care facilities.

Additionally, there are struggles for the student as they begin their educational journey. Whether they were at home or in day care, the role of the adult in charge changes dramatically as children become students. No longer is the primary focus on life skills (e.g., potty training, feed one's self, counting), but rather on academics (e.g., adding, writing, spelling) (Wolery, 1999).

Although it has not been reported as a concern for parents or their children, researchers (Hickman et al., 2008; Hickman & Heinrich, 2011; Lehr, et al., 2004) have documented indications a student will drop out of school can appear in the first years of formalized education. Trends in absences (Alexander et al., 2001; Lehr et al., 2004; Rush & Vitale, 1994) and reading levels (Hickman et al., 2008) can be used to predict students who will drop out of school prior to graduation. Hickman et al. (2008) noted in their study that students who dropped out had lower academic performance in kindergarten.

Further troubling for educators was their conclusion; students do not generally change their “developmental pathway set forth from kindergarten” (Hickman et al., 2008, p. 12).

The literature in the previous paragraph does not review factors external to the school. The correlation between kindergarten performance and eventual graduation from high school is dependent on a number of factors. Both familial and demographic characteristics, prior to any formalized education, play a role in a student’s success (Barnett, 1995). The presence of the well documented word gap (Hart & Risley, 1995; Walker & Carta, 2020) is an example of an additional struggle disadvantaged students have upon entering school.

Research has documented disproportionate readiness rates between low-income African American children when compared to similarly situated White children (Jarrett & Coba-Rodriguez, 2019; Marcella et al., 2014). Burchinal et al. (2011) stated the achievement gap between African American children and White children can be observed in children as young as three years old. Specific gaps that researchers have detailed among African American children entering kindergarten are in the areas of reading, writing, and communication skills (Child Trends, 2013; Welsh et al., 2010). Barbarin et al. (2008) prescribed this performance outcome to differing beliefs between parents and the schools in relation to what skills are important.

Middle school transition. As a student’s educational career continues, the next transition is typically from an elementary school to middle school. Pendergast et al., (2017) described the transition from elementary school to middle school as “complex and multidimensional” (p. 98). A report issued in 2002 by the National Middle School Association (as cited in Camblin, 2003), declared negative outcomes frequently

associated with the transition to middle school are a decline in performance motivation and a dwindling of students' self-perceptions. Although some students will adjust to their new surroundings with little difficulty, many students will experience struggles as they enter middle school (Hanewald, 2013; Kerbow, 1996). Maladjustments can affect students' future educational outcomes (Ashton, 2008).

The fundamental function of middle schools, initially at least, is to begin acclimating students to what high school will be like (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). For this reason, the organization of middle schools resemble the organization of high schools. Furthermore, many of the challenges that students experience entering middle school will be encountered again when they begin high school.

Middle school is the first time that students encounter an educational setting that is more organizationally driven and is less child-centered (Bîrle et al., 2017). Additionally, whereas elementary school teachers are generally whole-child centered, middle school teachers are subject-area specialists (Naser & Dever, 2019; Ward, 2000). Both of these changes to a student's educational experience can be challenging, yet all too often support systems that students have relied on for their entire educational career are no longer present (Mullins & Irving, 2000).

One of the difficulties with the transition to middle school is that children were in a familiar environment for four to six years (i.e., grade span of elementary school), and they felt secure (Maltais et al., 2017), whereas support systems that were in place for them in the elementary setting are no longer available (Mullins & Irvin, 2000). Part of their perceived security stems from being in a home room environment with little movement throughout the school day (Bîrle et al., 2017); in middle school, students

physically move from one class to another. All of the resources and materials that elementary students will need for the day are situated in one classroom (Chambers & Coffey, 2019). Furthermore, students only had to learn one or two teachers' styles and expectations each year in elementary school. Many students struggle with the transition to higher grade levels as they are required to meet the expectations of five to eight teachers and acclimate to each of their teaching styles (Duchesne et al. , 2012).

In addition to meeting the demands of new and varied teachers, the level of academic rigor increases in middle school as well. Naser and Dever (2019) stated the increased rigor caused "a mismatch between students' increasing needs for self-directed learning to foster self-efficacy and the rigid top-down academic demands of traditional schooling" (p. 365). In part, this incongruity can explain students' academic decline in middle school.

Middle school is a time when students begin experiencing more freedoms. They have a degree of freedom to select elective courses and freedom during transitions between classes, which occur at a much higher rate than they did in elementary school (Naser & Dever, 2019). For some students, the transition results in increased behavior incidents that result in discipline referrals (Naser & Dever, 2019). As behavior incidents increase, student academic performance has been noted to decrease for some middle school students (Dolgin, 2016). The transition from middle school to high school represents a similar struggle as the educational environment that students have become acclimated to over the course of three years in middle school is again altered.

High school transition. As tumultuous as the transition from elementary school to middle school can be, the transition from middle school to high school has been

identified by as the most difficult for school-age students (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013; Fulk 2003). Furthermore, the transition is often misunderstood by those not experiencing the phenomenon (Watson, 2015). The freshman transition is more than a simple grade promotion involving a move to a new school.

Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2103) stated that the advancement to high school represents “the most difficult transition point in education” (p. 170). Fulk (2003) called the freshman transition a “make or break” (p. 9). Previous researchers (Allensworth & Easton, 2007) have demonstrated course performance in ninth grade can be used to predict the likelihood that a student will dropout. Many students who eventually dropout report they began making the decision in the first few weeks of their freshman year (McIntosh & White, 2006). Benner and Graham (2009) concluded that a negative experience during this transitional period can significantly impact “the positive academic and psychosocial life course trajectories observed in middle school” (p. 370).

Up to this point in a student’s educational career, schools, even middle schools, have largely been viewed by the student “as a critical place for the nurturance and promotion of care” (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2103. p. 319), when compared to high schools. Other researchers have noted the relatively small size and overall attentiveness of primary schools (Roderick, 2003).

There are a number of factors that contribute to the difficult transition from middle school to high school. Some of the problems that students encounter stem from factors unrelated to the school itself. To get a fuller picture of the freshman transition, it is important to understand it in the context of the life transitions that occur. For many

students the neighborhood in which the school is located can have a negative impact (Hickman et al., 2013).

Aside from community factors, many students entering high school begin to experience freedom and independence at home. Some students have increased responsibilities at home while others begin looking for a job (Jindal-Snape, 2016). Blount (2012) referenced a 2011 report from the National Dropout Prevention Center that stated a contributing problem to student learning is a “dysfunctional home life” (p. 6).

Barriers to Successful Transition

To better understand what barriers exist for new freshmen students and how they affect the transition to high school, researchers have often categorized them (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Neild, 2009). After reviewing the literature, the categories that Neild (2009) detailed will serve as a framework for this research effort. This decision was made because, without articulating the categories, many of the barriers identified by other authors fit into them.

Neild (2009) classified barriers that students face when they transition into ninth grade into four categories. These categories are: (a) life-course changes, (b) transition to a new school, (c) changes related to academics, and (d) changes related to the organization and climate of high school. Neild acknowledged that not all of these categories affect students proportionately. Each category will be reviewed in further detail, taking into account what Neild (2009) described, along with the work of other researchers.

In addition to these subsections, two additional subsections will be added because existing literature details them as prominent barriers to student success. First, it is

important to understand the role of external barriers. External barriers are those factors affecting students that schools cannot control. It is important to note students do not begin in the same place, and too often the disparities do not level out the moment they enter high school. Although the struggles of African American males making the transition to high school will be discussed throughout the aforementioned subsections, the final subsection will be focused on struggles that researchers have identified as being unique to African American males.

Life-course change. The freshman transition coincides with developmental changes for an adolescent. These changes are not related to academic institutions (Neild, 2009); however, it is important to acknowledge the role that they play in a student's life. The physiological changes that occur during the freshmen transition play a role in the process (Letrello & Miles, 2003).

For most students, the transition to high school represents a new milestone. In response many parents begin to give their children more freedom (Neild, 2009; Patton et al., 2012). Although some students experience more freedom, others begin to experience increased responsibilities at home (Kamrath, 2019; Watson, 2015; Yosso, 2005), and still others begin looking for a job for the first time (Benner & Graham, 2009; Jindal-Snape, 2016). At the same time that students begin experiencing new freedoms and responsibilities, parents begin taking a more laissez-faire approach when it comes to school (Mac Iver et al., 2015; Neild, 2009; Simon, 2004). This newfound freedom can result in increased exposure to, and involvement with, drinking, smoking and drug use, particularly between the eighth and ninth grade (Weiss & Bearman, 2007).

Another component of the life-course change category is a physical change within the student. During the transition to high school, some students also begin puberty (Powell, 2012). The increase in sex hormones in a pubescent student often leads to students engaging in romantic relationships (Benner & Graham, 2009; Gutman & Eccles, 2007; Neild, 2009). During this time, some adolescents engage in risky sexual behaviors (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Dupéré, et al., 2015).

All of the changes that occur both internally and externally during the adolescent years can be difficult for young teenagers to process. Dudley (2012) reported the overwhelming experiences often trigger feelings of anxiety in high school freshman. Newman et al. (2007) indicated that new high school students often experience higher rates of depression as a result of poor handling of multiple changes.

The stressors of high school are consistent for all students, without regard to race. African American students, however, have a higher likelihood of experiencing life stressors during these formative years that can lead to psychological distress (Naser & Dever, 2019) and affect their academic achievement (Adkins et al., 2009; Sanchez et al., 2013). This distress can be triggered by poverty, a lack of resources, and other societal inequities (Anakwenze & Zuberi, 2013).

Transition to a new school. The second category of barriers, as identified by Neild (2009), that new freshmen face when transitioning to high school involves the physical moving of locations. For most students in the United States, becoming a freshman means that they will no longer be in the same building that they had been in for the past three years (Frasier, 2007). Just as with the elementary to middle school

transition described previously in this chapter, the middle school to high school transition involves going to a new building, for the majority of students (Frasier, 2007).

Some of the barriers associated a new school are social-emotional. To begin, when students leave middle school, some of the bonds that they have formed are broken (Neild, 2009; Watson, 2015). Students form bonds with teachers, counselors, coaches, and directors. The end of eighth grade, however, means that these relationships will, for all intents and purposes, be over. Schiller (1999) noted that on average, freshmen will attend high school with only 60% of their Grade 8 peers. In conjunction with other barriers described in this chapter, the reduction in familiar faces can add to the stress of this freshman transition.

Other barriers associated with a new school concerns the physical structure itself. For most students, their high school is the largest academic building that they have ever been in. Some of the concerns might seems trivial to adults, like forgetting where their locker is located (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Students frequently report that getting lost in their new school is one of their biggest concerns (Smith et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2006; Watson, 2015).

Changes related to academics. Schools are academic institutions, so it is understandable why students would have academic fears as they begin high school (Chapman & Sawyer, 2001). In a broad sense, academic issues related to the freshman transition include grades, classwork, homework, and academic deficits (Cappella & Weinstein, 2001; Neild, 2009). More specifically, student fears related to academics range from concerns about the amount of homework they will receive (Smith et al., 2006) to a worry that the teachers' expectations will be too high (Akos & Galassi, 2004;

Chapman & Sawyer, 2001; Watson, 2015). The grade reporting timeline, that is semester based instead of quarterly-reported grades, also causes concerns for new high school students (Mac Iver et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2008).

For most of their K-8 education journey, the idea of grade-level retention is non-existent. As a result, many students learn how to “get by” (Neild, 2009, p. 59), and thus lack the requisite knowledge and skills to be successful in high school. Once high school begins social promotion ends as students must now accrue credits in order to graduate (Mac Iver et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2008). Many students errantly believe the level of effort that they have exerted to this point will continue to be enough in high school.

In some instances, students who are deemed to have academic deficits, according to data gathered from grades or from standardized tests, are enrolled in remediation courses, instead of elective courses (Hickman et al., 2008). Enrollment in additional core classes means fewer elective courses that the student is likely to enjoy.

Additionally, some students who have not learned enough to “get by” are promoted to high school just as they had been promoted from grade to grade. For too many students, actual academic success has been nothing more than a figment of their imagination (Neild, 2009). In some instances, the likelihood that a student will eventually drop out can be determined based on their middle school grades and attendance (Balfanz et al., 2007; Neild & Balfanz, 2006), not promotion rate. Neild and Balfanz (2006) reported that failing either math or English in middle school was a better predictor than scores from standardized tests of how likely a student was to struggle academically in high school.

Even for students who are prepared for the rigors of high school curriculum, students in Grade 8 often report their fear that they will not be able to meet the demands of their new teachers. Researchers have determined this fear to be actualized for students who are, in theory, ready for high school (Neild et al., 2007). When other issues, reviewed in this section, are considered, some students who were high achievers in middle school regress and experience achievement loss (Cappella & Weinstein, 2001; Turner, 2007).

Changes related to organization and climate of high school. High schools are functionally different than schools that students have previously experienced. In U.S. elementary schools, students spend the majority of the day with one teacher who instructs the class in all subjects. Although there is a shift in the pedagogy when entering middle school, students are still the central focus for teachers. When they enter high school, students experience teachers that are content centered (Neild, 2009). Neild (2009) reported that students too often feel anonymous by the constant shuffling from class to class, and from teacher to teacher.

The pace of high school does not slow down for students during their tenure in the building, however there are further obstacles that freshmen face. Neild and Farley (2008) reported that teachers of freshmen students were more likely to be new to the profession and sometimes uncertified. Having inexperienced teachers adds to the confusion and frustrations that freshmen encounter. Additionally, new teachers lack the skills and expertise to work with students who have an academic gap (Neild, 2009) as described in the previous section.

Neild (2009) also reported that teachers who are concentrated on their subject matter have little incentive to learn more about their students on an individual level. Teachers in a traditional high school teach between five and seven classes each day. This load makes it difficult for teachers to form bonds with their students (Montgomery & Hirth, 2011; Somers & Piliawsky, 2004).

Schools are also structurally different from elementary and middle schools. One of the most widely cited barriers is the physical size of the school (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). For most students, a high school is the largest academic institution that they have ever been in. The size of the physical building can be daunting and overwhelming for students entering high school for the first time. Students often report that one of their greatest fears is getting lost in their new school (Smith, et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2006).

Several authors have stated that the size of the building weighs on students' minds so much that it is one of their greatest concerns; and as stated, primarily students are worried about getting lost in such a large school (Andrews & Bishop, 2012; Emmett & McGee, 2012; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). Additionally, the size of the school allows for students to encounter more episodes of negative interactions with classmates such as teasing and fighting (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013). One factor that is mentioned as a fear for both students and their parents is being bullied by upperclassmen (Hickman et al., 2013). The size of the building, coupled with the thought of 14-year-olds interacting with 18-year-olds causes trepidation for some students and their parents (Smith et al., 2006).

External barriers. There are a number of factors that negatively affect a student's transition to high school having nothing to do with the institution itself.

Although some have already been presented in previous sections, a few deserve further explanation. Additional barriers have also been presented in the research and will be delineated as well.

In addition to granting more freedom to their new high school student, researchers have established the freshman year as the time when parental involvement in school decreases (Mac Iver et al., 2015; Simon, 2004). Researchers have concluded that parent involvement has the potential to directly and indirectly affect students' outcomes (Muller, 1995; Sui-Chi & Willms, 1996). Parental involvement can include a host of actions including participating in school activities, joining the Parent Teacher Organization, or parents having conversations about school with their child (Muller, 1995). When parents are uninvolved, sometimes teachers associate the disengagement as lack of interest or willingness in their student's academics (Mac Iver et al., 2015). Additionally, parental support has been linked to increased student motivation and increased student achievement (Jeynes, 2012).

Falbo et al. (2001) detailed three methods of involvement for parents for a successful transition to high school. Their assertion was that students were more successful in their transition to high school when their parents: (a) monitored them every day, (b) evaluated information obtained from monitoring, and (c) intervened by directly and indirectly participating in the school. Instead of being disengaged, these actions make parents partners in the freshman transition.

Additional barriers for African American males. African American students face challenges as they begin high school that their White counterparts do not (Benner & Graham, 2009). Many factors have been determined to have a negative effect on the

education of African American males. When factors are accompanied by the barriers detailed throughout this section, a more complete picture of the struggle that these young men face becomes clearer. A review of literature that was focused on additional barriers for African American males was conducted and this subsection details some of the struggles these students face.

To begin, one of the challenges that students of all races face in the United States is the rise of single-parent households (Orrock & Clark, 2018). According to a 2019 report released by the United States Census Bureau, nearly 26% of American youth live in a single-parent household. By nearly a 5 to 1 ratio, those children are being raised by a mother alone. However, the same report delineated that the percentage of children being raised by one parent is not proportional across racial lines. In fact, nearly 46% of African American children are being raised by a mother alone, compared to less than 17% of White children (United States Census Bureau, 2019).

As documented in the literature, single-parent households face many disadvantages and stressors that two-parent households do not encounter (Orrock & Clark, 2018). Some of these barriers include financial burdens, increased exposure to crime, and psychological stress (Paschall et al., 2003). Stayhorn (2009) claimed these stressors can lead to academic decline. Compounding these problems, African American males who lack a positive male role model in the home have lower self-esteem, less confidence in their academic abilities, and an increased likelihood of joining a gang (Parker & Maggard, 2009; Sterrett, et al., 2009). These factors contribute to African American males having the lowest educational aspirations across subpopulations (Witherspoon & Ennett, 2011).

A related, but not necessarily intertwined, factor is poverty. As mentioned previously, African American male students are more likely to be raised by a single parent and experience financial difficulties. Researchers have stated a correlation exists between poverty and academic deficits (Welner & Carter, 2013). When a child lives in poverty, meeting the demands of school become less of a focus. Children born into poverty have a higher likelihood of being born premature (Ravitch, 2013), experiencing hunger and malnutrition (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2002), and residing in inadequate housing (Ravitch, 2013). Even when housing is adequate, students in poverty often find their living situations unstable, frequently moving from one place to another (Kerbow, 1996). Furthermore, children who live in poverty have poorer vision (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2002) and insufficient medical care (Hoffman et al., 2003).

In recent years, the conversation has shifted from the achievement gap to an opportunity gap (Ladson-Billings, 2013). In short, many African American male students are behind because they lack the opportunities that their White peers have before they ever walk through the doors of a school. In addition, African American males are often not afforded the same opportunities in schools. Researchers (Berkner & Chavez, 1997; Riley, 1997) have demonstrated that African American males are the least likely subpopulation to be enrolled in courses required for college admittance and for courses geared towards helping students be successful in college, such as Advanced Placement courses (Cisneros et al., 2014). The lack of inclusion in advanced coursework is due, in part, to schools over diagnosing African American students as having a need to be in special education courses (Saddler, 2005).

The lack of opportunities afforded to African American male students is not new and is, in fact, rooted in historical struggles. The history of African Americans in the United States began before the founding of the nation when slaves were brought to North America from Africa. The barrier to education was institutionalized by state laws that made it illegal to educate slaves, and by the federal Fugitive Slave Act of 1850.

Even after the Civil War and passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the United States' Constitution, African Americans did not gain equal access to educational opportunities. Throughout most of the south, Jim Crow laws were passed to restrict African American's access to equality in every area of life, including education (Jarrett, 2013). The Supreme Court's 1896 decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* legitimized the practice of having separate educational facilities for African American children (Bishop, 1977) and served to institutionalize the racist policies that had been implemented throughout the nation.

It would take 58 years before the Supreme Court reversed the *Plessy* decision. In a unanimous decision, the Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* (1954) that separate educational facilities were inherently unequal and a violation of the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment. In writing the majority opinion for the Court, Chief Justice Earl Warren offered a stern rebuke and a grim prognostication when he wrote "to separate them [African American students] from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone" (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954). In fact, even the Kansas court that previously ruled against the African American students acknowledged

that educational segregation had a “detrimental effect” on African American students (Brown v. Board of Education, 1954). To this day, the nation’s educators continue to struggle to find the proper pedagogy to engage African American male students in their classrooms (Bell, 2004).

Muhammed (2020) described ways in which contemporary education continues to underserve African American male students and all students from groups who have been historically disenfranchised by the education system. Muhammed (2020) cited a cultural and racial “mismatch” (p. 40) between teachers and students as one reason for the continued marginalization of African American students. Not laying the entire burden at the feet of the teachers themselves, Muhammed (2020) stated that teacher preparation programs do not offer adequate training to respond to the disparity that exists between White teachers and their African American students.

Other institutional barriers have been presented in the literature as well. African American male students are more likely to be stereotyped by schools than are their White counterparts (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Holcomb-McCoy, 2011). There are also fewer African American male educators who understand the cultural background of the students (Monroe & Obidiah, 2004). Anfara and Schmid (2007) identified the lack of positive role models for African American students as a barrier to a successful transition to high school.

African American children raised in poverty also experience fewer opportunities. Rothstein (2013) points out that children in poverty often do not take trips to museums or zoos, they do not travel, and they do not participate in organized team sports. As a result,

“a substantial effect on academic achievement ...between Black[s] and White[s]” (Dixon-Román et al., 2013, p. 4) has been established.

Furthermore, African American students are more likely than their same-age peers to live in the inner cities. Patton et al. (2012) reported that African American males are more likely to be exposed to violence at home and in their communities and as a result they are more likely than their same-age peers to experience a negative impact on their cognitive functioning. Researchers (Elsaesser, et al., 2016; Richards et al., 2015) have reported 76% to 96% of inner-city youth, who are disproportionately African American, are exposed to some form of violence in their community. Compounding these exposures, African American youth are less likely to have access to mental health professionals outside of the school setting (Snowden, 2001) to help them process and cope with the stressors they encounter.

Another barrier experienced by African American males is related to academic institutions themselves. In short, a cultural disconnect exists between schools and adolescent African American male students. Sue and Sue (2013) claimed the problem stems from schools requiring African American males to behave by a set of norms that do not exist at home or in the communities in which they reside. If African American males have to learn a new set of rules, and yet their White counterparts do not, this situation could lead to weariness, resentment, and defiance towards school (Kupchick & Ellis, 2008). This result could account, at least in part, for African American male students experiencing poorer adjustment to, and lower grades in high school (Benner & Graham, 2007, 2009). Schools' lack of cultural sensitivity may lead to perceived inferiority and eventually to these young men dropping out of school (Orrock & Clark, 2018).

Dropping Out

Existing literature on dropping out of high school and the ramifications of such a decision is reviewed in this section. As stated in the first chapter, dropping out of school is rarely a rash decision that students make, though it can be an ill-informed one. In this section, a review of literature related to dropping out of school is presented in two categories: the reasons cited for dropping out and the effects of dropping out.

As mentioned in previous sections, although students do not generally drop out of school until their junior or senior year in high school, the decision to do so is often made during freshman year (Geltner et al., 2011). As mentioned in an earlier section, indicators that a student will eventually dropout of school can be discovered in elementary school (Hickmman & Bartholomew, 2008). If a student in elementary school fails math and English, has chronic absenteeism, and receives negative behavior marks, there is a 3 in 4 chance the student will eventually drop out of school (Neild et al., 2007). Bornsheuer et al. (2010) demonstrated that students who were retained during their freshman year were more likely to not graduate on time and subsequently dropout of school, when compared to their peers who were not retained. Dropping out of school is not a single event; it is the culmination of a journey that has been marred by academic decline (Watson, 2015).

Reasons for dropping out. Most students who drop out state the primary cause is a lack of positive relationships with adults on campus (Edmunds et al., 2012; Langenkamp, 2010; Montgomery & Hirth, 2011; Scott, 2005). Scott (2005) stated the lack of a positive relationships with adults is not simply corollary but causal. Students who establish positive relationships with teachers are more engaged in their own learning

(Clark et al, 2016). Other researchers (Newman et al., 2000) have stated that low performing students, those at the greatest risk of dropping out of school, do not receive the support they need from teachers. Developing bonds with teachers is an essential component of the freshman transition (Clark & Hunley, 2007). Successfully developing teacher-student bonds can pay dividends throughout the student's high school career (Dudley, 2012); failure to do so can result in students dropping out of school.

In addition to developing relationships with adults, it is important for students to develop positive relationships with other students on campus (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Haviland, 2005). Part of the problem, as mentioned previously, is as follows: upon entering high school, many of the friends made during the middle school years do not attend the same high school (Neild, 2009). The inability to maintain previously established relationships with same-aged peers has also been cited as a reason why students drop out of school (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

Furthermore, upon entering high school, freshmen encounter the largest age gap they have experienced since leaving elementary school. Many students enter high school when they are 14 years old and immediately begin occupying the same space as senior students who are 18 or 19 years old. Research has demonstrated that negative relationships with upperclassmen, particularly fears about being bullied, can contribute to a student's desire to drop out of school (Akos & Galassi, 2004, Hertzog & Morgan, 2001, Watson, 2015). Increasing reliance on technology and use of social media has exposed students to more instances of bullying and has led to cyberbullying (Altundag & Ayas, 2020), which can be a contributing factor to students making the decision to drop out of high school.

In addition to relationship issues, there are other factors that often lead to students dropping out of high school. Unfortunately, many of the barriers that freshmen encounter, mentioned in the previous section, result in students getting lost in the shuffle and they might begin skipping and failing classes (Herlihy, 2007). Understanding the reasons why students drop out of school are important; ascertaining such knowledge can be useful when trying to keep students in school.

As with the barriers discussed previously in this chapter, there are some factors that lead to dropping out that schools have little control over. Some of these factors include teen pregnancy and substance abuse (Kamrath, 2019). Additionally, some students help shoulder some of the financial burdens facing their family and begin working (Foley & Pang, 2006).

It is important to note that African American male students drop out of school at a higher rate than their White counterparts (Kamrath, 2019). A 2015 study demonstrated that in some areas of the United States nearly one-third of African Americans dropout of high school (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015). Students who receive multiple exclusionary disciplinary actions, such as suspensions, develop academic deficits, contributing to their dropping out (Loveless, 2017). A recent study in Texas demonstrated that African American male students receive a disproportionate amount of exclusionary discipline when compared to other races or ethnic groups (Miller & Slate, 2019).

Effects of dropping out. The consequences of not finishing high school are numerous and well known. The decision to dropout affects the individual and the society economically and civically (Hickman et al., 2008). Perhaps the most pervasive

consequence is that students who drop out of high school are more likely to end up living in poverty (Hickman et al., 2013). In 2010, then Secretary of Education Arne Duncan education was “the only sure path out of poverty” (McMurrey, 2014, p. 27).

Furthermore, students who dropout have a higher probability of coming from a low-income family (Murname, 2013), thus the cycle of poverty remains unbroken.

Students who drop out of high school are more likely to be unemployed (Blount, 2012; DaGiau, 1998; DePaoli et al., 2015; Murname, 2013) or chronically underemployed (McMurrey, 2014; Watson, 2015) than students who receive a high school diploma. Neild et al. (2007) stated the problem like this: “It is practically impossible for individuals lacking a high school diploma to earn a living [in order] to participate meaningfully in civic life” (p. 28).

Furthermore, the inability of dropouts to maintain viable employment strains the national economy. According to McFarland, Cui, and Stark (2018), the average high school dropout will cost the economy approximately \$262,000 over the course of their life. This figure was calculated based on the individual’s “lower tax contributions, higher reliance on Medicaid and Medicare, ... and higher reliance on welfare” (McFarland et al., 2018, p. 1).

According to NCES, in 2017 there were 2.1 million dropouts. Utilizing McFarland et al.’s (2018) figure, over the course of their lives alone, these dropouts will cost United States’ economy more than 550 billion dollars. If nothing else is going to sound the alarm, certainly this staggering cost should.

Indeed, students who drop out of school are more likely to end up in poverty, and thus will need governmental assistance (Woolridge, 2016). Neild et al. (2007) stated that

“it is practically impossible for individuals lacking a high school diploma to earn a living to participate meaningfully in civic life” (p. 28). The inability to purposefully engage in society leaves individuals with little choice but to rely on the assistance of the government, as well as their family and friends. Perhaps one of the most damning realities is that students who dropout of high school are more likely to be incarcerated at some point in their life than students who complete high school (DePaoli et al., 2015; Stark & Noel, 2015; Watson, 2015). Over 80% of individuals who have been incarcerated did not graduate from high school (Montgomery & Hirth, 2011; Thurlow et al., 2002). The persistence of these facts is the reason why schools continue to be referred to as a pipeline for prisons (Brown et al., 2020).

For African American male students, the picture continues to be bleaker. According to the Federal Bureau of Prisons, in June of 2020, African American men comprised approximately 38.1% of the prison population in the United States (Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2020). The most recent estimate provided by the United States Census Bureau (2019) calculates that African American males comprise less than 6.7% of the entire population. These figures represent an overwhelming over-representation of African American males in the criminal justice system. When viewed in the contextual fact that most African American males who are incarcerated lack a high school diploma (Montgomery & Hirth, 2011), the need to focus on their high school completion becomes evident.

Previously Implemented Programs

District and campus level administrators are not blind to the difficulties that come with the freshman transition. A large number of programs have been implemented at campuses across the nation and research has been conducted on their implementation and effectiveness. In this section, a review of literature related to what campuses have implemented is detailed.

In response to the barriers that students face when making the transition to high school, some school districts have created campuses dedicated exclusively to freshmen students. Many freshman campuses were initially created to relieve overcrowding at high schools (Smith-Mumford, 2004). Those Grade 9 schools that remain today have the purpose of easing students into the more rigorous curriculum in an environment free from concern about upper classmen or getting lost in a larger building (Smith-Mumford, 2004). If part of the problem is as described in the previous section that transitions themselves are correlated with academic regression (Jindal-Snape, 2016), then adding an extra transition seems counterproductive (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010).

A different strategy employed by some schools is to have freshmen students in the same building as upperclassmen but isolating the new high school students in one area. Sometimes called the “freshman wing” (McIntosh & White, 2006, p. 40) or a freshman academy (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010; Emmett & McGee, 2012; Montgomery & Hirth, 2011), this strategy creates a “school-within-a-school model” (Clark & Hunley, 2007, p. 41). As with freshman campuses, the intent behind freshman wings is to isolate the new high school students from upper classmen as much as possible to make the transition easier (Montgomery & Hirth, 2011). Additionally, freshman academies commonly

utilize a core group of teachers who all teach the same students (Clark & Hunley, 2007), and have common planning time (Montgomery & Hirth, 2011). This design also enables schools to institute programs designed to help with the transition.

Referencing the barriers to success detailed earlier in this chapter, freshman academies help alleviate many students' concerns as they enter high school. Being housed in one area of the school will limit the chances a student becomes lost in a larger building. Students are also less likely to see upperclassmen, thus reducing the opportunity to be bullied by them. Additionally, students can experience a more nurturing environment than they would if their classes were located throughout the building (Ellerbrock and Kiefer, 2010).

Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2010) discussed the program employed by one school called a "The Freshman Focus" (p. 393). They stated that this program "created a ninth-grade community of care" (p. 399) at the school where it was implemented. This community of care, they concluded, led to increased academic performance. The students who were involved in the program had more successful high school careers than their peers did (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013).

To address students' specific concerns about getting lost in the building, many schools give students tours of the building (Clark & Hunley, 2007; Fulk, 2003; Rumberger et al., 2017). In some instances, parents are given a tour as well (Andrews & Bishop, 2012; Geltner et al., 2011; Mac Iver et al., 2015). These tours can occur during the spring semester while the students are still in middle school or during the summer (Cauley & Jovanovaich, 2006; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010;

McIntosh & White, 2006). Geltner et al. (2011) recommended students should visit their future high school multiple times prior to the beginning of their freshman year.

Knowing that academic regression is a possibility for students, schools will sometimes offer programs during the summer to help students be prepared for the demands of high school. This practice can be especially true if remediation is needed (Bornsheuer et al., 2010). Math and reading are common subjects to be offered in these programs (Neild, 2009). In lieu of a full program, schools might offer students work to complete on their own to prepare them for the rigors of high school (Akos & Galassi, 2004; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010).

In some instances, schools have implemented annual, comprehensive orientation programs during the summer for students to attend prior to their first day. Typically, these orientations include meeting school staff and tours of the building (Roybal et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2005). Upperclassmen can be utilized during these events to provide freshmen the opportunity to meet portions of the student body in a non-threatening environment (Haviland, 2005). Haviland (2005) described how one school accomplished this goal by recruiting upperclassmen from campus programs such as the National Honor Society.

Geltner et al. (2011) detailed the orientation program of one high school. During the week-long orientation, the students at the study school were given information about how to be successful in high school, had opportunities to meet future classmates, and participated in activities (Geltner et al., 2011). Getlner et al. (2011) reported that participation resulted in “Higher GPAs, better attendance, less course failures, and fewer discipline referrals,” (p. 48) than students who did not attend.

Counselors can also play a vital role in the success of students' freshman transition. To begin, schools should have a counselor who exclusively services freshman (Montgomery & Hirth, 2011). DaGiau (1997) suggested that counselors should provide a broad program that encourages students to explore "their own self-awareness and self-acceptance" (p. 3). DaGiau (1997) also suggested utilizing small group counseling sessions to address a number of problems that have been associated with the freshman transition.

Counselors should visit middle school campuses during students' Grade 8 school year (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). Doing so will help establish relationship prior to the businesses of the first day of school. Counselors should also be familiar with community resources that are available for student in need (Montgomery & Hirth, 2011).

Researchers (Andrews & Bishop, 2012; Clark et al., 2016; Lampert, 2005; Shaw, 2009) have noted the positive influence peer mentors can have on students as they begin high school. Andrews and Bishop (2012) detailed how the academic and emotional support provided by upperclassmen who served as mentors contributed to the academic success of students during their freshmen year and beyond. Lampert (2005) noted similar findings related to academic success as evidenced by a reduced failure rate during students' freshman year.

Effective transition programs need to address the specific needs of the student groups who have historically struggled (Holland, 2017). Little literature was found however on programs designed specifically to address the needs of African American males during the freshman transition. Somers et al. (2016) delineated the results showing a positive correlation between one school's combined tutoring and mentor program. The

mentors in the study were members of the community who were not school personnel (Somers et al., 2016).

Holcomb-McCoy (2011) suggested that the best method to help African American male students is to address the cultural needs they have. Specifically, Holcomb-McCoy (2011) identified stereotyping, a cultural disconnect between the school and their African American male students, and a lack of positive role models as the primary barriers to success. Saddler (2005) also identified the cultural rift between schools and their African American students as a barrier to success. To address these concerns, Holcomb-McCoy (2011) recommended increased planning and communication between the middle and high schools as well as target counseling. To address the lack of positive role models, Holcomb-McCoy (2011) suggested establishing a mentoring program and gave recommendations of external entities that could serve as points of contact to begin a relationship. Establishing a relationship with a mentor is something that schools need to take an active role in because African American males are less likely than their White counterparts to establish mentor relationships on their own (Young, 2003).

Somers and Piliawsky (2004) noted measures that schools can take to assist their African American students. Among their conclusions were the need for tutors and professional consultants. Wyatt (2009) suggested that schools should utilize African American college students and local businesses. Regular meetings with African American role models were also determined to be helpful (Somers & Piliawsky, 2004). These role models served as mentors who “encouraged [the African American students] to be hopeful about their own future and to be optimistic about life’s possibilities” (Somers & Piliawsky, 2004, p. 21).

In reality, there is no single method for solving the freshman transition problem. Schools that are serious about easing the transition should take a comprehensive approach, incorporating as many strategies as possible (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Roybal et al., 2014). Some researchers have stated that a minimum of three strategies described in the previous section should be implemented (Baker et al., 2001; Hertzog & Morgan, 1998); others have argued a minimum of five strategies be used (McIntosh & White, 2006, Roybal, 2011). In short, it is incumbent on schools to utilize as many strategies as feasible to put new freshman in the best situation possible for success.

African American Administrators' Voice

Searches to determine what previous researchers have unearthed about African American administrators' perceptions of the freshman transition yielded no results at the time of this dissertation. In fact, the voices of administrators of any race seem to be absent from the current literature about transitions. Administrators are mentioned in literature, but in a limited capacity.

In some research about the freshman transition experience, principals are merely referenced. For example, Dudley (2012) only mentions principals one time, and it comes in the middle of a quote from a participant. Geltner et al. (2012) list activities that were conducted as part of their study and included "meeting the principal" (p.50) as one of the activities. Although not specific to the freshman transition, DePaolis et al. (2015) discussed various trainings that principals could do to help prevent students from dropping out.

Some researchers mention the assertions made by principals. Neild (2009) mentioned principals who claimed a given transition program for freshmen at their

campus was successful. Other authors (Andrews & Bishop, 2012; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000) have made passing references to principals' assertions about graduation rates.

A third category of how campus administrators are mentioned in the literature about transitions is via a description of their role in a given program. Roybal et al. (2014) discussed the necessity of effective leadership for transitions programs to be successful. A variety of other roles have been mentioned in literature, including hiring an administrator exclusively for freshman students (Herlihy, 2007), making informed hiring decisions (Montgomery & Hirth, 2011), creating buy-in for transition programs (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010), and working closely with counselors to reduce the number of students who dropout (Blount, 2012).

Absent in all of these studies are voices from principals regarding their perceptions of the freshman transition experience. Additionally, I was not able to locate literature that added the voice of African American male administrators. I was also unable to locate literature specific to the experiences of African American male students during this transition experience.

Summary

In this chapter, a review of relevant literature was presented. Specifically, literature about transitions, barriers to success for students entering high school, the problem of dropping out, and programs that have previously been implemented to address transitions was reviewed. Additionally, studies describing the barriers in the transition experience for African American male students were examined. In the next chapter, the methods for this research project are presented.

CHAPTER III

Method

Ponterotto (2005) stated, “methodology refers to the process and procedures of the research” (p.132). Previous studies have pointed to the need for further research about students’ transition to high school and specifically that of the African American male student. This chapter includes information about the design of this study, the participants, the instrumentation, and the data collection. An explanation of the data analysis is also provided.

The purpose of this collective case study was to gain an understanding of the Grade 8 to Grade 9 transition experience for African American male students in one suburban school district. The participants (i.e., African American male administrators in the study district) were asked to recall their own transition to high school, consider the transition for contemporary African American male students, and discuss their perceptions of the transition experiences of these students. Furthermore, the participants were asked to compare their views of the freshman transition for African American males students to that of other groups of students.

After detailing the reasons for selecting a qualitative methodology, generally, and a case study approach for this research, specifically, the focus of this chapter will turn to the details of the method. In this chapter the following areas are addressed: (a) research design, (b) research setting, (c) selection of participants, (d) data collection, (e) instrumentation, (f) role of researcher, (g) trustworthiness and credibility, (h) data analysis, and (i) limitations.

Answering the research questions required choosing the most appropriate method for investigating from qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches (Maxwell, 2005). A simple distinction between qualitative research and quantitative research can be framed as the difference between words and numbers (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The reasons to engage in qualitative research are to describe, discover, and explore (Durdella, 2019), whereas the purpose of quantitative research is to determine the relationship between variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2018); my intention with this research was the former. Therefore, a qualitative approach was taken with this research.

Research Design

Utilizing various quantitative methodologies as cited in Chapter II, researchers have determined that an achievement gap exists for some African American male students as they transition into high school. The purpose of this study was to answer the question “Why?” For that reason, a qualitative research methodology is the most appropriate.

For this research, a collective case study was utilized. A case study is a method of inquiry that involves analysis of a bounded case in a real-world, contemporary setting (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2009). Creswell (2013) stated that case studies are popular in a variety of fields including psychology, medicine, law, and political science. The method has also been used in the field of education (e.g., Borg, 2010).

Case studies offer a number of advantages for dissertation research. To begin, case studies are similar to approaches taken by educational leaders related to school improvement (Creswell, 2007). In the simplest terms, case studies involve collecting and analyzing data (Durdella, 2019)—a task that is conducted on a regular basis in schools.

Additionally, case studies offer “unique openness” (Stake, 1995, p. xii) and broad applications for a variety of fields.

Collective case studies involve collecting data from individual cases and comparing them (Stake, 1994). Merriam (1998) stated that a case is “a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries” (p. 27). When well defined, a case “can be a person, a program, a group” (Yazan, 2015, p. 148). Every person has a unique experience during the transition to high school; thus, each of the participants in this study will be treated as an individual case.

This study was bound in a number of ways. First, each participant was an individual case. Second, all of the participants were African American males. Third, all of the participants served as administrators at either the high school or middle school level. Finally, all of the participants worked at one of the schools in the study district.

Merriam (1998) identified three characteristics that define case studies: particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic. Particularistic studies focus on a single event or phenomenon (Yazan, 2015). For this study, the single phenomenon being explored is the freshman transition. The descriptive nature of a case study should result in a thick description that involves contextualizing human social and physical behaviors. Heurism helps to broaden the reader’s understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Yazan, 2015). Through this research, readers will gain an understanding of how African American male administrators perceive the experience of African American male students during the freshman transition. As such, case studies can be useful for identifying larger patterns (Durdella, 2019).

Interviews are one of the most common methods of data collection in qualitative research (Creswell, 2007). Interviews can be conducted in a number of ways: via email, telephone, face-to-face, individually, or with a group (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), or via teleconference. Because of the current situations created by COVID-19, participants were given the option to participate in the interview face-to-face or via teleconference. For this research, half of the interviews were conducted face-to-face; the other half were conducted utilizing the teleconferencing platform Zoom. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and via teleconference for a number of reasons.

Interviews, both face-to-face and via teleconference, were the most appropriate method for research in this study. This method allowed each individual's voice to be heard and understood. It also provided me, as the researcher, an opportunity to follow up with the participants as necessary. Additionally, interviews afforded the individual participants the chance to open up about their lived experiences (Seidman, 2013).

Conducting interviews provided me the opportunity to understand the meaning that the participants have taken from their lived experiences (Seidman, 2013). Each participant was asked a pre-determined set of questions, with some of the questions having contingent follow-up questions based on the participant's response. Interviews in case studies can be less structured than interviews conducted during other forms of qualitative research (Yin, 2002). Therefore, probing and clarifying questions were asked on an as-needed basis, a further benefit of face-to-face interviews for this research. More information about the data collection and instrument will be described in a later section.

Research Setting

The participants involved in this study worked at the high school or middle school level in the selected school district. The study district was a large suburban district, located outside of a major metroplex in the southern portion of the United States. According to the study district's accountability report for the 2018-2019 school year, the demographic composition of the student body at the study district was 37.9% White, 35.4% Hispanic, and 20.8% African American. The remaining 5.9% of the student body was identified as another race/ethnicity. The study district's proportion of African American students was more than one and a half times greater than that of the state. Furthermore, 32.3% of the students at the study school were considered economically disadvantaged.

This study was conducted in the fall semester of the 2020-2021 school year. During the spring semester of the previous school year, schools across Texas were shut down as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews were conducted during the first semester that students returned to campus. For this reason, some participants chose to be interviewed via Zoom.

An additional contextual element is also important to note. During the summer of 2020, the Black Lives Matter movement became prominent in the United States following a viral video showing the death of a man as a result of excessive force by a police officer. Protests, rallies, and nationwide calls for police reform followed. As a

result, heightened sensitivity to the issue of race relations could affect the participants' answers.

Selection of a Purposive Sample

In quantitative analyses, researchers use statistical procedures to analyze relationships between numbered data. In doing so, quantitative researchers attempt to make generalizations from an entire population (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It is not common for qualitative researchers to make generalizations about larger populations (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007).

The purpose of this collective case study was to gain an understanding of the Grade 8 to Grade 9 transition experience for African American male students in one suburban school district. As such, determinations were made about selecting participants. A requisite for selecting participants for qualitative research is establishing: (a) the appropriate sampling strategy, (b) the appropriate size of the sample, and (c) the process for selecting participants based on the research questions (Creswell, 2007; Durdella, 2019). What follows is a description of how I accomplished each of these aspects for this study.

Sampling Strategy

For this research, I selected participants utilizing purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is one of the most widely utilized methods of participant selection in case studies (Seidman, 2013). The idea behind purposeful sampling is to select individuals who will best assist the researcher in understanding the research problem and the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Additionally, purposeful sampling is appropriate because all of the participants must meet a set criterion before they can be considered.

For this research, each participant had to meet two criteria. First, all of the participants were African American male administrators. Second, all of the participants were either a high school or middle school administrator who worked at a school in the study district. These criteria were chosen because these administrators worked directly with students who transition from Grade 8 to Grade 9 in the study district. To participate, administrators also agreed to be interviewed and have the interview recorded.

Sample Size

After a determination was made about how participants will be selected, the next step in the process was determining how many participants were needed for the study (Creswell, 2007). Establishing how many participants to include in the study is as important as determining a sampling strategy (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Marshall (1996) argued for a design that is flexible and allows the researcher to determine the number of participants that is reasonable for the study. Scholars have debated how many participants should be included in a case study. Some have suggested that only four or five should be included. (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Durdella (2019) argued that the number can range from as little as 10 to as many as 40. For this research, the intent was to interview two individuals from each of the two levels (i.e., high school and middle school), yielding four participants. Thus, the number of participants in this study was within the ranges suggested by previous researchers (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Process for Participant Selection

The first step in the participant selection process was to identify possible gatekeepers. Gatekeepers are individuals who “provide access to the site(s) and allow or permit the research to be done” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 185). The study district had a department dedicated to screening anyone who wants to conduct research within the district. A meeting was held with the gatekeeper who was the head of this department. After approval from the dissertation committee to conduct the research, an application was submitted to, and approved by, this study district. This step was taken after the university Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval had been granted.

In order to find participants, I examined the district’s website to identify African American male administrators at the high school level and at the middle school level. An introductory email was sent to four potential administrators soliciting their participation. This email included the purpose of the research as well as the interview questions. Three of the four administrators who were initially contacted replied and expressed interest in participating. I did not receive communication from the fourth. After a follow-up email did not yield a response, a different administrator was selected and contacted via email. This individual agreed to participate. Thus, five administrators were contacted, four participated. After gaining consent, each of the four participants were interviewed.

Data Collection

Researchers have debated what type of data is necessary for a case study. Despite a qualitative focus, some researchers have suggested quantitative data should still be used (Yin, 2002). Other researchers (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995) have contended that only

qualitative data are necessary. To answer the research questions, only qualitative data will be used.

The qualitative data for this study came in the form of semi-structured interviews, conducted either face-to-face, or via teleconference. The participants were interviewed one time. No additional interviews were needed to reach saturation. The interviews occurred at a time and location of the participant's choosing. Having the choice to choose the setting provided the participants with a familiar and non-threatening environment in which to be interviewed (Seidman, 2013). Additionally, by allowing the participant to select the time of the interview, I as being considerate of their busy schedule.

I began each interview with a specific set of open-ended questions that will allow the participant to answer with as much, or as little, information as they want. I also had planned, contingent follow-up questions. These questions were used when the participants do not elaborate on their answers. The list of interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

The audio from each interview was recorded. This fact was made known to the participants in the introductory email. It was also made known in the informed consent that was obtained from the participants at the beginning of the interviews. The recordings were captured with the use of a digital app. I also took notes during the interview. These field notes included my thoughts on the participants' reactions to specific questions (e.g., the participant did not hesitate to answer, the participant needed clarification on what a word meant, the participant appeared uncomfortable, the participant added emphasis to answer). Additionally, these notes served as a supplement

to the recording. After each interview, these notes were converted to a digital, password protected file and then the hard copies were destroyed.

All of the interviews were recorded using a password-protected digital voice recording application (app). The app had a feature that transcribed the interviews. After the initial transcription, I reviewed the audio and the transcript to ensure that the two were aligned. By utilizing this app and completing the transcription myself, I reduced the number of people with access to the recordings and the likelihood that sensitive information could be mishandled.

After the transcript of the interview was processed, the audio files were deleted and the transcript was digitized and secured in a password protected file. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym (e.g., HS1, MS2) to protect the participants' identities and to keep their answers confidential. No names were used during the interviews; thus, the names of the participants were not part of the recording.

Face-to-face interviews, even those conducted utilizing Zoom, were used for a number of reasons. A primary reason for using this basic mode of inquiry was that it helped me better understand the lived experiences of the participants (Seidman, 2013). Doing so fulfilled one of the goals of this research project. Furthermore, these interviews helped validate the meaning the participants prescribed to their experiences. Face-to-face interviews also communicate the value of the participants' experiences (Seidman, 2013). Additionally, utilization of face-to-face interviews allowed for follow up questions as they arise. Some initial answers were unclear and face-to-face interviews allowed for clarifying moments.

Instrumentation

In an effort to triangulate the data (discussed later in this chapter), I utilized two instruments to achieve three data points. This section will describe the two instruments and how each instrument will be administered. The third data point will also be discussed.

The primary instrument for this research project was a confidential, semi-structured interview, conducted either face-to-face or via teleconference, with each participant (African American male administrator). The interviews occurred at a time and location of the participant's choosing. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. The interview protocol can be found in Appendix A.

The interview questions were developed with the research questions in mind. The interview questions were derived from my personal experience with students as they enter high school for the first time. I took into account the likelihood that the participants would have the knowledge base and experience to answer the questions. I also considered word choice as I crafted the questions, so as to ensure that the questions would be clear to the participants. Roberts (2020) stated "interview questions should be carefully worded in a way that is easy to understand and framed in a way that allows the research participant to share freely" (p. 3190).

Furthermore, the work of previous researchers, as detailed in the literature review in the previous chapter, contributed to the formation of the questions. All of the interview questions were reviewed and approved by my dissertation chair. We discussed to what extent the participants would be comfortable answering the questions. Additionally, the questions will be approved by the university's (IRB).

In order to refine the interview questions and assure their validity, a pilot test was conducted (Creswell, 2013). I selected individuals to pilot test the questions who have experience working with African American male students during their freshman year. No member of the pilot test was a participant in the study. Additionally, I sought individuals who have experience writing interview questions. Those completing the pilot test were asked to compare the interview questions to the purpose of the study and the research questions. The pilot test participants were also asked to interpret what the interview questions are asking and provide feedback on the clarity and content of each question. The interview questions were revised based on participants' feedback.

The second instrument used for this research project was a confidential, online questionnaire that was completed by a counselor at each campus where a participating administrator (case) worked. The platform utilized was Qualtrics. In addition to being the preferred platform of the university, Qualtrics software keeps data secure. Additionally, using an online instrument provided the opportunity for the counselors who participate to fill out the questionnaire at their convenience.

Qualtrics also provided a number of benefits to me as the researcher. One benefit was that Qualtrics organized and exported all of the answers to a spread sheet that I used to analyze the data. Additionally, after all of the questionnaires were completed, the email of each participant was removed and a pseudonym was assigned. A final benefit was that the online questionnaire was inexpensive and allowed me, as the researcher, to gather data rapidly (Wright, 2005).

Alessi and Martin (2020) point out that drawbacks exist when conducting online questionnaires. Two limitations identified were that recruitment and completion were

more difficult to accomplish with online questionnaires (Alessi & Martin, 2020). It was my hope that the participating campus administrator could help facilitate the recruitment and completion of the counselor questionnaire. Another pitfall deals with concerns about privacy (Alessi & Martin, 2020). In addition to stating the purpose of the research and their participation in the study, the first screen of the questionnaire assured all of the counselors who took the questionnaires that their answers will remain confidential.

The third data point was taken from the questionnaire administered to the counselors. The final question on the questionnaire asked the counselors for the percentage of their repeat freshmen, defined as students who are in their second year of high school but do not have enough credits to be classified as sophomores, and who are African American males. The figures provided were used to further triangulate the participants' responses in Chapter IV.

Role of the Researcher

Throughout this study, I was be a member of the administrative team at a school in the study district. I was an assistant principal at a high school. Also, I primarily worked with freshman students. My experience with freshmen was but one reason why I selected this topic.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) made the assertion that there are two important areas to comment on in regard to a researcher conducting qualitative research. The first is the past experiences of the researcher and the other is how those experiences shape the researcher's interpretations. Other authors have also stressed the importance of being reflexive (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Wolcott, 2010). Particularly because this research was

conducted in the school district at which I worked and is thus considered *backyard research* (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), it is important to be as transparent as possible.

The study took place in my 14th year of education. In those 14 years, I have worked with freshman in some context for 12 of those years. The capacities that I have worked with them have included as a social studies teacher, as a softball and soccer coach, and as an assistant principal who was responsible for freshman academics and discipline. Each of these roles allowed me to witness the various aspects of the transition to high school.

As a classroom teacher, I witnessed some of my African American students struggle with the increased rigor and workload that is associated with high school courses. I worked with some of these same students in summer school, after they had already failed to be successful in their first attempt. More often than not, the students in my summer school classes were African American males. Many of these students seemed to share a negative perception of what the rest of their educational careers would entail.

As a coach, I witnessed young African American men and women as they changed physically and mentally during high school. Some of the African American student-athletes who I coached had already completed puberty, some were in the midst of it, and others did not begin the process until the year was well under way. Some African American students excelled athletically, whereas others stayed in the programs to have a place of social acceptance.

As an assistant principal, I have previously implemented a number of transition programs, as described in the previous chapter, that researchers have reported help

students with their transition to high school. Some of these include bringing Grade 8 students to the high school for visits (Fulk, 2003); hosting Grade 8 parent nights at the high school (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000); and making visits to the middle schools during the spring semester to meet the students, answer questions, and address students' concerns about high school (McIntosh & White, 2006). Despite these efforts, the transition to high school remains a challenge that many students do not overcome. My experience is that many of the students who do not earn enough credits to be promoted to the next grade are African American males.

I have witnessed the combination of struggles that have been described in the literature. My various roles have also given me a chance to witness the impact that the freshman transition has on parents and families, as their sons and daughters begin the final stage of their K-12 educational career. My experiences have also made helping African American male students during this transitional period a personal passion.

Even before I began this research effort, I believed the transition to high school was difficult for some students. As a teacher and coach, I watched many of my young African American male students struggle. Although many of these students were successful, some did not complete high school—they dropped out. I have come to understand that the freshman transition is more than a difficult period in the life of teenagers; the freshman transition, when not handled with support, can have a profound impact on the life of a student that could potentially have long-lasting, negative implications. When this experience is compounded by the societal realities faced by African American males in the 21st century, the problems of this transition experience can be magnified.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

In qualitative research, it is imperative that the researcher makes a case for how they will ensure that their results can be trusted. Creswell and Creswell (2018) and Creswell and Poth (2018) assert that it is best to use multiple methods to validate a qualitative research effort. To ensure trustworthiness and credibility in this research, multiple steps were taken. The section that follows describes the steps taken to ensure an accurate reflection of the participants' responses.

Regarding data collection, the interview questions were screened and approved by the chair of the dissertation committee. A pilot test of the interview questions, as previously described, was conducted to improve the process. After, the interview questions were reviewed and approved by the university's IRB. Approval by the IRB was both a best practice and a requirement of the university. These steps ensured that the questions asked did not pose ethical dilemmas for the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Additionally, the IRB approved an informed consent form prior to research being conducted (Seidman, 2013). This form helped to ensure that the participants were willing to be part of the study and that they were aware of any potential negative impacts that the research could have. These steps were taken as a means of protecting human subjects.

Another step that was utilized during this project was that I took field notes. Creswell and Poth (2018) noted that field notes and the use of a high-quality audio recording app enhanced the credibility of the research. After each interview, I reflected and recorded any observations that might enhance the data interpretation. Additionally, the use of an audio recording app allowed for verbatim transcribing of the interview.

After the interview was transcribed, the interviewee was asked to review the transcript to ensure it was accurate. Member checking can help add to the trustworthiness and credibility of the end product (Merriam, 1998; Seidman, 2013). This step also provided an opportunity for the participant to clarify or expound upon any of the statements that they made. Each of the participants were notified of this step at the end of the interviews. Two of the four participants replied to the email to expound on one of their answers.

A common method of validation in case studies is triangulation (Creswell & Poth, 2018)). Triangulation involves confirming evidence from different sources (Creswell, 2013). As the name implies, typically three data points are used. Previous research in education has established a precedent, however, for utilization of two data points (Jones, 2015). For this research, three sets of data will be used.

The first data set was the interviews conducted with African American male administrators. As four interviews were conducted, this set included four points. A second set of data came in the form of a questionnaire sent to a counselor at each campus where an interview (or case) occurred. The questionnaire can be found in Appendix B. The final question asked high school counselors to provide a percentage of repeat freshman who were African American males. Their answer to this question served as a third data point. Further, literature reviewed in Chapter II will be used as appropriate to triangulate findings reported in Chapter V.

During the data coding, I kept a detailed data-coding log (codebook). In line with the research design, I utilized In Vivo Coding as one coding strategy. In Vivo Coding establishes codes or themes “from the actual language of the participant” (Saldaña, 2016,

p. 77). By using this coding method, the participants' voices were more fully utilized. This codebook included a record of coding decisions that were made during the data analysis stage.

Finally, a copy of this dissertation was given to the district office where the study took place. This step helped to ensure that I acted in good conscience and was transparent. Furthermore, if the study district decides that the findings of the study offer valuable insight into the students' experiences, the district could decide to implement recommendations to support their students and administrators.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involves processing raw data in a way that can be easily understood by the reader. Merriam (1998) says that making data understandable to the reader "involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read-it is the process of making meaning" (p. 178). This process included collecting interview data from participants, organizing the data, coding, and organizing the codes into themes that represent the lived experiences of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this research, a spreadsheet was utilized to manage and organize the data collected.

The data for each case was coded over a process of two cycles. In the first cycle, key words and phrases from the interviews were identified. The second cycle involved comparing the key words and phrases to one another and developing themes that described what the participants said.

Because the purpose of this research was to give voice to the participants who have worked with African American male students as they have navigated the freshman

transition, the first round of coding in this research utilized In Vivo Coding. This process involved creating codes based on the exact words used by the participants (Saldaña, 2016). Saldaña (2016) noted that In Vivo Coding results in codes that are more “evocative” than other methods like descriptive coding (p. 77).

Finally, after analysis of the transcripts and the codes, identified themes were presented using the words of the participants and my descriptions of the themes. The themes are displayed in tables in the next chapter. Each table includes the name of the theme, an operational definition of the theme, and an example of the theme from the text of the participants’ interviews.

Limitations

Creswell and Creswell (2018) note several limitations when conducting interviews. One limitation is that the views expressed during an interview have been filtered through the perspective of the interviewee. That is to say, there will be bias from the standpoint of the administrators. Additionally, interviewing can pose a problem because not all participants will be able to articulate their thoughts and perspectives equally (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Perhaps one of the limitations of the study that was the most difficult to overcome relates to myself. Seidman (2013) articulated that it can be difficult for members of one race to interview those of another. Boushel (2000) stated it is particularly complex for Whites and African Americans to interview each other. As a White male, some of the African American participants that I interviewed could have had reservations in talking with me. Steps to mitigate this limitation were taken and are described below.

One suggestion made by Seidman (2013) to address these reservations is rapport building. As a current administrator in the district, all of the potential participants were familiar with who I was. I have already established relationships with many of the potential participants. Because I knew all of the participants in some capacity, there was no need for an informal gatekeeper (Richardson et al., 1965; Seidman, 2013). It was my hope that the participants would be eager to share their experiences with African American male students as the purpose of this research effort is to improve the freshman transition for a group of students who have historically struggled. Perhaps because of the rapport that had been established, all of the participants shared their perceptions of the freshman transition for African American male students. All four of the participants also shared personal stories from their experiences transitioning to high school, as well as their experiences as African American males in society today.

Additionally, the interviews took place at a time and place selected by the participant. The interviews took place in the participants' offices and via Zoom. A familiar, comfortable environment helped participants to feel at ease and more willing to participate in the research project (Elwood & Martin, 2000; Hanssen, 2012; Herzog, 2005).

Summary

In this chapter, the method for this research project has been presented. Specifically, the research design, the various aspects of participant selection, data collection, instrumentation, the role of the researcher, trustworthiness and credibility, data analysis, data security, and limitations of the study were all discussed.

CHAPTER IV

Presentation and Analysis of Data

The purpose of this collective case study was to gain an understanding of the Grade 8 to Grade 9 transition experience for African American male students in one suburban school district. Additionally, I wanted to explore what programs and procedures African American male administrators thought would be beneficial for African American male students during their transition to high school. An analysis of the data is presented in this chapter.

Two forms of data were collected during this investigation. Data were collected from interviews conducted with four African American male administrators. Two administrators worked at the high school level; two worked at the middle school level. The participants were asked to reflect on their own transition to high school and consider what ultimately helped them navigate this change. Additionally, they were asked for their thoughts on the freshman transition for contemporary African American male students. Specifically, they were asked for their perception of the transition and what programs or procedures they, as African American male administrators, thought would benefit today's African American male students as they begin high school.

The second form of data came from an electronic questionnaire given to school counselors. After the interviews were conducted with the campus administrator, I selected a counselor from the same campus to complete the questionnaire. The data were used to triangulate information gathered from the African American male administrators. Data from the questionnaire has been incorporated throughout this chapter to detail points

of convergence, divergence, and other points of interest. Additionally, previous research is cited throughout the text where appropriate.

Three research questions guided this study. They were as follows:

1. What perceptions do African American male high school administrators have of the freshman transition for contemporary African American male students?
2. What perceptions do African American male middle school administrators have of the freshman transition for contemporary African American male students?
3. What do African American male administrators believe will support African American male students with the freshman transition?

In this chapter, a discussion of the data collected from the participants of the study is presented. Because a stated purpose of this study is to include the voices of African American male administrators into the existing literature, In Vivo Coding was used to analyze the data. The conclusions presented in this study are based on the analysis of the data from the interviews and data gathered from the counselor questionnaires.

Background of Participants

Although no demographic questions were asked, the participants met the criteria for participant selection as detailed in Chapter III (i.e., African American, male, current administrator at either the high school or middle school level, employed by the study district). Additional information was gathered based on the participants' answers to the interview questions and from information on the study district's website. Information about each participant is delineated in Table 1. To protect the identity of each participant, each was given a pseudonym during the coding process.

Additionally, I felt it was important to establish the credibility of each participant as a professional educator. To this end, each participant's years in education is given in a range. A range was used instead of the exact number to protect the identity of each participant.

Table 1

Background of Study Participants

Participant	Position (At Time of Interview)	Education Level	Previous Positions	Years in Education
HS1	HS Associate Principal	M.Ed.	HS Assistant Principal, HS Teacher, HS Coach	20-25
HS2	HS Associate Principal	M.Ed.	HS Assistant Principal, HS Teacher, HS Coach	15-20
MS1	MS Principal	Ed.D.	HS Associate Principal, HS Teacher, HS Coach	10-15
MS2	MS Principal	Ed.D. (in progress)	HS Assistant Principal, HS Teacher, HS Coach	15-20

Note. Abbreviations: HS = high school; MS = middle school.

Beyond demographic information, participants shared information about their individual transitions to high school. Two of the participants (HS1, HS2) revealed that they attended high schools that were predominately White, and one attended a school that was predominately African American (HS2). HS2 and MS1 went to high school in rural areas and HS1 went to a high school in a mid-sized city. MS2 did not mention any specifics about the specific high school he attended.

Participants' Transition Experiences

During the interviews, each participant was asked to reflect on his own experiences during the freshman transition. Their answers revealed that these African American men experienced the freshman transition in different ways. Two participants recalled the transition being particularly difficult, and the other two recalled the experience with fondness. Each participant also addressed the role of transition programs during their transition to high school as well as the factors that contributed to their own success.

Participant experiences. HS1 was one of the participants who remembered the transition being difficult. He attributed the difficulties to “social aspects.” HS1 stated that he was “bused to the other side of town, to a predominately White middle school,” but “the high school I was zoned to was predominately African American. So, I had not had a lot of experience with an all African American school culture and climate.” He further explained that his “transition there was difficult because some of the norms and the routines that I experienced in middle school were a lot different than in high school.”

HS1 also stated that he experienced an issue with the level of instruction. For him, it was not that the material was too challenging, but that the expectations at the predominately African American high school were lower than at his predominately White middle school. He stated that “a lot of those students had to catch up and they were not at the same level from where I was previously.” He further noted the instruction at his high school was “not challenging, lower-level instruction...as opposed to one that would challenge students and invoke more thought.”

This statement was interesting because much of the literature, as cited in the Literature Review chapter, stated that students tend to be unprepared with the academic demands of high school (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Naser and Dever 2019). However, as it pertains to African American students and African American males in particular, there is a documented account of teachers lowering the expectations of what they can accomplish (Gershenson & Papageorge, 2018; Thakur, 2007). In 1999, then Governor George W. Bush referred to lower expectations for African American students as the “soft bigotry of low expectations” (Stoops, 2018).

Like HS1, MS1 also attended a high school that was predominately White. He recalled having difficulty making friends because he was “one of the few African American students...in my class.” MS1 noted the lack of students who were like him made it difficult to find his “footing.” He also stated that he went to a junior high for Grade 8 and Grade 9. Afterwards, he attended the senior high. This experience added an additional transition to a point in his life that he summed up as “a difficult adjustment at that time.”

HS2 and MS2 both reflected on their transitions to high school in a positive light. HS2 recalled that the primary difficulties during his transition to high school were the result of adapting to “the high school schedule” and “the demands of the class work.” Both of the difficulties described by HS2 are barriers that were detailed in the literature review (e.g., Naser& Dever, 2019; Neild et al., 2007).

HS2 also described some difficulty with the level of instruction at his high school. I found it interesting that, based on their previous experiences, HS1 found the level of instruction to be low-level, but HS2 found the rigor of the coursework at his school to be

one of the few difficulties he experienced. Both phenomena were cited previously by researchers as barriers to success (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Neild, 2009).

MS2 stated the barriers he experienced were “nothing exceptional.” He expounded on the experience and stated he had “the normal nerves” and had to get used to being in a “new space.” I detailed in my field notes that MS2’s answer to this question seemed genuine and that he most likely had a positive experience as he transitioned to high school.

Transition programs. Three of the four participants, HS2 being the exception, stated that their schools did not have transition programs in place. When asked what was in place during his transition, MS1 stated “Absolutely nothing. It was just show up and figure it out.” Because the freshman transition is understudied (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013; Hertzog & Morgan, 1998; Smith et al., 2006), this experience did not come as a surprise to me. I described in my field notes that the participants who stated nothing was in place laughed or chuckled when they answered this question. It appeared that they found humor in the juxtaposition between the programs in place today and the fact that programs were not available when they were in high school.

HS2 stated that his school did have one transition program in place. He stated that his school in a rural area worked with a local community college to establish a program that helped students see the value of education. He further stated that it helped the students “focus on attending some kind of post-high school institution.” Unlike the experience of HS1, HS2’s school set a high expectation that was future-oriented and expected students to do well in school and pursue education beyond high school.

Factors for success. Despite difficulties by a couple of the participants, all of them were eventually able to adjust and successfully complete high school. Each of them has also earned multiple degrees. To that end, I asked each of the participants to what they attributed their individual success. Their answers revealed two themes that contributed to the participants' successful transition and are detailed in Table 2. The two identified themes were *positive adult relationships* and *connectedness*.

Table 2

Themes for Factors Contributing to Participants' Success

Theme	Definition	Example Statements
Positive Adult Relationship	An individual who serves as a role model, motivator, or inspiration during a student's freshman transition. Examples include teachers, counselors, coaches, parents or other family members, and community members.	MS1: "It was a given that you were going to finish high school...My parents set that expectation early." HS1: "I was fortunate that one of my church members...was my freshman guidance counselor and she put me on the right track."
Connectedness	The ability of a student to be a part of a club, organization, program, or team. Examples include athletic teams, band, and other extra and co-curricular activities.	HS2: "I did a lot. I played basketball, I was in band...and that made a huge impact." MS2: "I remember my transition to high school was a good one. I think a big part of that is because of being involved in extra curriculars...sports and band."

Note. Abbreviations: HS = high school; MS = middle school.

The participants illustrated the importance of having a positive relationship with an adult during their transition to high school. The adult can be someone who works at the school, or they can also be a family member or someone in the community. Positive

adult relationships have been cited in research and previously in the Literature Review chapter, as important for the success of students during the freshman transition (e.g., Edmunds et al., 2012; Langenkamp, 2010; Montgomery & Hirth, 2011; Scott, 2005).

As noted in Table 2, MS1 had a positive adult relationship at home. MS1 was also involved in sports and formed positive relationships with his coaches. In addition to having a member of his church work with him at school, as noted in Table 2, HS1 also attributes his success during the freshman transition to “hardnosed teachers that challenged and pushed every single day.”

MS2 also acknowledged the role that positive adult relationships can play for students. He formed relationships with adults as a function of being involved in extra-curricular activities. He said when “the staff know that you’re involved in something, it makes a difference.” MS2 also stated it was important to “know I had someone else I could call just in case something came up. It played a huge role.”

The participants also discussed the importance of students being connected to something at the school. The most salient example in high school was athletics. Three of the four participants mentioned their participation in athletics during the transition to high school. MS2 stated that being involved in sports gave him “a chance to meet people, be in the school, learn a little bit about the school, and participate in things before the first day of classes.” HS2 stated that athletics “gave [him] involvement on-campus” which kept him “busy and out of trouble.”

HS1 stated that during his transition he had “teachers that wanted to see students involved in clubs, organizations, and activities.” HS1 also stated that involvement in extra and co-curricular activities bring additional accountability for students. HS1 stated,

“in order to be a part of this club or organization you had to maintain grades in high school. And so, everyone wanted to be a part of a club or an organization.” Similar to the administrators’ responses, one counselor cited “gaps in learning” and “difficulty adapting to a more rigorous academic environment” as barriers to success during the freshman transition.

Findings for Research Question 1

The first research question sought to explore African American male high school administrators’ perceptions of the freshman transition for contemporary African American male students. The two high school administrators shared what, in their view, are the difficulties experienced by contemporary African American males during their transition to high school. The administrators further discussed what factors contribute to the successful transition for African American male students.

Difficulties. HS1 stated his perception is that the primary difficulty for African American males is that they have not been adequately prepared for the realities of high school. Specifically, he stated that many African American male students on his campus “do not have the self-discipline, with regards to norms, rules, policies, and procedures” that are in place. He also stated that there are “gaps or deficits” in regard to academics. He further stated that he doesn’t “think middle school has prepared” African American male students. Academic deficits during the freshman transition have been studied by previous researchers (Cappella & Weinstein; Loveless, 2017; Neild, 2009). This opinion means that the teachers and administrators on his campus have to work harder to meet students where they are.

One of the counselors indicated that “gaps in academics” was an issue for some students. The counselor indicated that on her campus, counselors work with students to support them academically. The fact that this intervention is in place indicates the extent to which academic gaps are a barrier for success for students during the freshman transition.

HS2 stated that he believes the freshman transition “depends on the prior experience the young man has faced.” He stated students who have “been successful in a school setting” probably have an easier transition than most. On the other side, HS2 stated that he felt “like a lot of our young African American men don’t have...a constant in their lives.” He stated the lack of a “constant” is a growing trend for African American males. He stated the result of this trend is “unfortunately...we are losing a lot of our young African American males. I would say between ninth grade and 10th grade, or eighth grade and ninth grade, we lose our kids.”

The “constant” discussed by HS2 has been researched (Benner & Graham, 2009). Some examples of this topic discussed in the Literature Review chapter include the disproportionality of African American males raised by a single mother (United States Census Bureau, 2019), tend to grow up in poverty (Welner & Carter, 2013), and face additional mental and emotional stressors as a result (Paschall et al., 2003).

HS2 also noticed the decline in parent involvement, beginning in high school, as a contributing factor to the struggle African American males experience during the freshman transition. Decreased parental involvement has been documented by researchers (Mac Iver et al., 2015; Simon, 2004) as a contributing factor to the struggle students experience during the freshman transition and has been detailed in Chapter II.

One of the counselors who responded to the questionnaire stated that one of the barriers for freshman students is that they have “little to no home support.” In regard to parental support as students begin their high school careers, HS2 stated:

Parents are either totally withdrawn, or are not focused on school...Most of our parents at high school are hands-off. By the time they get to high school, parents are like ‘I’m done.’ You know, in elementary and middle [school] parents are all involved for some reason. A lot of our kids need parents even more in high school. And that is especially true for our young men.

Both high school administrators addressed the role of the Black Lives Matter movement and its effect on the freshman transition for African American male students. Interestingly, both participants perceived a positive and negative side to the movement. HS1 stated that “students [are] being more vocal” and students are “advocating more for themselves.”

HS2 stated he believed it has helped create a level of solidarity among students. He gave a personal example. He stated his daughter “graduated last year...and her entire senior class did a little demonstration at graduation that we didn’t expect them to do.” HS2 stated that many students are taking it upon themselves to research and learn more about societal issues.

Both participants cautioned, however, that students researching issues on their own is “a gift and a curse,” in the words of HS1. He stated, “a lot of them are looking on social media and the internet for talking points, or rules, and they are not factually correct.” His perception is that this information has caused “people to draw a line in the sand, in regard to racial issues” which has led to “people talking at each other, instead of

to each other.” HS2 echoed those sentiments when he stated his primary question for many youths is “how much does the kid know about the movement?” He continued that “there is a trust issue within the Black community...and our young Black males have taken that rhetoric...to justify their distrust.”

Factors for success. When discussing what factors contribute to a student’s success during the freshman transition, the high school participants had very different answers. For HS1, success starts at home. He stated “the family dynamics and structure as a whole” are what contribute to students being successful. Recalling his own experience, HS1 detailed how he was raised by his mother, who worked at night, and his grandparents. He stated the three of them “instilled the value of education” in him. As it pertains to contemporary African American male students, he stated “I think if we have families that understand the value and importance of education...and how it impacts them and their future,” students will be successful.

Although HS1 mostly focused on attributes that were external to the school, HS2’s answer was focused on what schools can do. He again stated that schools “have to have those hooks” in order to get “buy-in” from students who otherwise do not want to be at school. HS2 stated that schools “really have to sell it...in order for the kids to have buy-in.” He elaborated on what he thinks the hooks are. HS2 stated “it could be a program; it could be a club; it could be an individual; it could be adults.”

HS2 expressed another justification for getting students involved in extra and co-curricular activities in high school. He stated that some students, for a variety of reasons, do not like school. He stated a lot of students have an attitude of “Why should I be excited about school? And so, I think that for a lot of young, African American males,

you have to have those hooks.” In their study, Witherspoon and Ennett (2011) concluded African American males have the lowest educational aspirations of any subpopulation. Therefore, providing “hooks” might increase a student’s desire to be at school.

Findings for Research Question 2

The second research question sought to explore African American male middle school administrators’ perceptions of the freshman transition for contemporary African American male students. The two middle school administrators shared what, in their view, are the difficulties experienced by contemporary African American males during their transition to high school. They further discussed what factors contribute to the successful transition for African American male students.

Difficulties. When discussing the difficulties faced by contemporary African American males during the freshman transition, MS1 discussed a wide range of issues. First, he discussed the size of schools as an issue. He called it going from “the little pond to the big pond.” He further stated that schools can have camps and orientations in the summer “but that doesn’t prepare you to be in the hallways with 3,000 or 3,500 kids on a day-to-day basis.” The size of schools is a barrier that has been identified by previous researchers (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). This barrier was not mentioned by any of the counselors in their questionnaire responses.

MS1 also discussed the difficulty of students to find who they are during an “awkward maturity age.” MS1 stated “it’s just an awkward time for everyone.” As he focused more specifically on African American males, he stated that the “recent happenings in society as far as...police protests, and elections, and things like that, I can’t

imagine transition to high school right now.” He stated these events and others “have muddied the waters for these kids about what’s important during their transition.”

MS2 stated that the transition experience varies from “student to student and from campus to campus.” He clarified that for “African American males...[there] is a huge difference between coming to a predominately minority school and that transition, versus coming to a school where they are the minority.” MS2 also discussed the historical context of education and the “granting of full access to education” for African Americans. He expounded on this by saying “if everybody just expects it to be the same, I think they are kind of missing a piece of that puzzle,” because African American males “start off a little bit behind.”

Both of the middle school administrators directly and indirectly discussed issues relating to the Black Lives Matter movement throughout their interviews. MS1 and MS2 did this by discussing the cultural mismatch that exists between many African American male students and their “mostly White” teachers, as MS2 shared. Like the high school administrators, MS1 discussed potential down sides to the movement for students. In contrast, MS2 mostly expressed the positive elements of the movement.

MS1 and MS2 both discussed the cultural mismatch or lack of cultural understanding, between White teachers and their African American students. MS1 and MS2 both stated that a contributing factor to the cultural mismatch is a difference between what they are taught at home and what they are taught at school. MS1 stated “African American males, in particular, are trying to balance what they have been told their whole life...versus being unsure of how I should interact” with situations in school. MS2 explained that his daughters spend a lot of time with their maternal grandmother,

who was “the first class in her school to integrate.” He stated that she “passes down stories from her time in school to my kids. That makes me have to have different conversations with them.”

For the schools, MS1 stated that it is important to teach kids “which battles to fight and which ones not to fight.” He acknowledged kids need to be taught this lesson for situations inside and outside of school. MS1 compared a student giving him attitude for “asking him to remove his ear buds” to being pulled over by the police. He stated that with African American males “we have to teach them ...it’s a battle between survival and proving a point. If a cop pulls you over and he says give me your ID, why argue with that? Wrong is wrong and right is right.”

MS2 looked at the issue from the other side. He stated the cultural mismatch has occurred because schools “are taking a strictly middle-class version how things should be, and putting that on everyone.” MS2 also stated that for some adults, they “are quick to turn a misdemeanor into a felony.” He further explained that sometimes there is simply a “misunderstanding, or a lack of cultural awareness” that leads to differing interpretations of a situation on the part of the student and the teacher. MS2 gave the example of teachers making students “look them in [their] eyes when [they] are speaking” to them. Admittedly, this scenario is one which I have first hand experience. In my second year as a teacher, I was addressing an African American male student named Chris in the hallway about his behavior in class. He stated “Yes, sir” and “No, sir” to every question I asked him, but the young man looked down at his feet the entire time I spoke. I asked him if he would look up at me. He told me that he did not want to be disrespectful and his grandfather taught him to never look at an adult while they were

speaking. This experience was at odds with how I was raised and has remained a salient example in my life of the differing social norms among cultures.

As he continued speaking about the cultural mismatch between White teachers and their African American students, MS2 recalled a specific situation that happened with his own daughter. He told me that when the district was 100% virtual, he overheard his daughter's dance teacher discussing jazz dance. MS2 recalls the teacher saying "well in jazz, jazz dance style, the African side, they contribute the rhythm and the dancing and the so and so. But the European side contributes the elegance." MS2 stated he assumed he either misheard what was stated or, giving the teacher the benefit of the doubt, maybe part of the slide did not get read. He asked his daughter to send him the presentation and "sure enough...it says, here's the part. Europeans contributed grace and elegance, and Africans contributed rhythm." He recalled what really struck him was his daughter asking him "why the teacher thought Africans don't have elegance and grace."

MS2's incorporation of historical discrimination in education ties into the conceptional framework of this study, Critical Race Theory. Furthermore, his description of the cultural mismatch between teachers and their students has been cited previously (Muhammed, 2020). MS1 added that for some African American male students, the freshman transition represents the "first time they have really had to interact with seven or eight White teachers. And that can be overwhelming if you have never had to do that."

Factors for success. When discussing factors that contribute to a successful freshman transition for African American male students, both middle school administrators addressed ways schools can help students. MS1 discussed the importance

for African American to have someone on campus “who looks like them.” MS1, when discussing his own educational experience recalled the lack of African American teachers. “I remember not having a single Black male teacher until I got to college” he stated. MS1 stated contemporary African American male students need “somebody that [they] could look up to. That can tell [them] ‘I’ve been through this and I’ve done this.’”

In addition to this, MS2 stated that “schools with trained staff” contribute to a successful transition. MS2 was not talking about instruction. Instead, he stated teachers need to be trained on creating a “welcoming environment where [African American male students] feel welcomed. Where they feel seen. I think that would help...with the transition.” MS2 did not elaborate on what constitutes a “welcoming environment.”

The high school and middle school administrators had some similarities in their perceptions of the freshman transition for African American male students. HS1, HS2, and MS1 expressed that more needs to be done. HS1 stated that as a result of current practices, “some kids are slipping through the cracks.” MS1 stated he feels “like we just have a lot of African American males that get lost in that transition.” He further stated that is not because they’re not capable, but because there is nothing specifically identified for them to improve.”

African American male students “slipping through the cracks” is more than just the perception on the part of the participants. In addition to previously cited literature (e.g., Orrock & Clark, 2018), this sentiment was confirmed by the counselor questionnaire. One question asked the participants what percentage of their repeat freshmen students (those students who were freshmen last year and did not earn enough credits to be considered a sophomore this year) were African American males. One

participant stated this subpopulation represented 83% of the repeat freshman at their campus. Because of the confidential nature of the questionnaire, I do not know which campus this participant represented. The percentage of repeat freshmen who were African American males far exceeds the proportion that African Americans comprise of the district (20.8%), as cited in Chapter III.

The question thus becomes, what can one do to help African American male students and improve their freshman transition? What can be done to retain more students? How can educators “hook” or appeal to African American male students during this critical academic milestone?

Findings for Research Question 3

The third research question sought to explore what programs or procedures African American male administrators thought would benefit African American male students during the freshman transition. Prior to beginning this research, I assumed that my findings would support prior research on programs that have been previously implemented. This assumption was made based on the research presented in Chapter II as well as my own experiences implementing transition programs. My assumptions were not accurate for this study.

Three themes emerged and will be discussed independently. The three themes were *mentors*, *training*, and *connectedness* (see Table 3). Two categories of training were discussed by the participants: staff training and student training. Table 3 delineates the themes and provides definitions for each, as well as example statements from the transcripts.

Interestingly, none of the counselors who responded to the questionnaire stated that their campus offered any of these programs or procedures. The counselors' responses focused on strategies such as "small group counseling," "academic intervention counseling," and "referral to behavior specialists." Additional programs cited by the counselors are aligned to those presented in Chapter II including a summer orientation, "counselor visits" to the middle schools, and "campus tours."

Mentors. When asked specifically what programs or procedures the participants thought would be beneficial for African American male students, mentorships was the most common answer. Two of the four participants explicitly stated, "mentors." An additional participant discussed programs that involved mentorships. Although the fourth participant did not explicitly cite mentor programs as something that would benefit African American male students during the freshman transition, his answers to other questions mentioned positive adult relationships as one of the keys to his success in high school, and he also discussed ways in which staff play a role.

Although HS1 paused before answering most of the questions, I indicated in my field notes that HS1 did not hesitate to tell me what he felt would be beneficial for African American male students as they transition to high school. "I would love a mentor program" he stated. HS1 explained that many teachers have "experiences different from those kids. So, there's a pre-judging aspect...they don't understand some the same struggles and difficulties that we had to endure to be successful." He further stated that it is important for African American male students to have "someone they can connect with who can relate to them."

Table 3

Themes for Recommended Programs and Procedures for Successful Freshman Transition for African American Male Students

Theme	Definition	Example Statements
Mentor Program	A formal program in which an adult on campus works with a student or group of students outside of the classroom setting to help them navigate the freshman transition specifically, and high school in general.	HS1: "I would love a mentor program...for those students to connect to." MS1: "I think a mentor program...a well organized and designed mentor program."
Training	Formal and informal sessions that present information on a specific topic to a targeted group of individuals (e.g., staff, students)	HS2: "We had a conference every year...and selected students to experience it." MS2: "staff awareness and staff trainings would probably be one of the most impactful things to help African American students' transition."
Connectedness	The ability of a student to be a part of a club, organization, program, or team. Examples include athletic teams, band, and other extra and co-curricular activities.	HS1: "I do feel like it is important for African American [male] students to be involved in on-campus activities." HS2: "Just like I was in sports, I think hooks like that can serve an important role in the [freshman] transition process."

Note. Abbreviations: HS = high school; MS = middle school.

Although HS1 paused before answering most of the questions, I indicated in my field notes that HS1 did not hesitate to tell me what he felt would be beneficial for African American male students as they transition to high school. "I would love a mentor program" he stated. HS1 explained that many teachers have "experiences different from those kids. So, there's a pre-judging aspect...they don't understand some the same

struggles and difficulties that we had to endure to be successful.” He further stated that it is important for African American male students to have “someone they can connect with who can relate to them.”

MS1 stated that he thought a mentor program would be something beneficial to the success of African American males during the freshman transition. He detailed what he thought one should look like. He stated it needs to be “well organized mentor program where you pair, and not one Black male administrator or teacher with 10 kids, but more of a one-on-one type of environment.” MS1 stated that it is important for young African American males to “have somebody that they can depend on, they can go to.”

MS1 also stated that he thinks the mentors should be faculty members of all races. He stated:

I also think it's important to not only spend time with a Black male, I think it's important to spend time with a White male as well because when you go through life, you don't get to pick who you interact with. You don't get to pick who you interview with for work. So, let a Black male drive a program like that but they have to have interaction with White people, they have to have interaction with Hispanic people. So that you feel comfortable in any environment that you're going to be in. So...if you have to be addressed with as positive or negative criticism by somebody of a different race than you can feel comfortable with that.

Further, MS1 also thought that the mentor program needed to make sure that students understood the consequences for the actions they take. He stated that it is important for mentors to “hold those kids accountable.” He expounded on this by saying

the mentors need to be able to say to the student “I’m here for you and I want to support you. But you can’t come up here and act crazy.”

HS2 discussed a partnership that his school had implemented. He stated that his school partnered with the local community college to provide more opportunities for his male students. HS2 stated the community college had “a program specifically for African American and Hispanic male students.” He explained “students applied [to the program] and then were paired with a mentor from the community college.”

HS1 discussed some of the factors that limit his school’s ability to implement a mentor program on his campus. He stated that “the lack of Black males” on his campus makes it difficult. HS1 stated African American male students need someone who has “endured some of the same struggles and difficulties.” HS1 stated his campus has “close to 1,000 freshmen and it’s difficult to connect and individualize a message for each student.”

Training. When asked about programs or procedures that could benefit African American males, two participants directly discussed training as something that would be beneficial. Additionally, the other two participants discussed training in answers to other questions. For the participants, the school staff who work with African American male students during the freshman transition need training. Additionally, two of the participants discussed ways in which students need training.

MS2 discussed the importance of teachers to appreciate the background of their students to help reduce cultural misunderstandings. Specifically, MS2 stated that schools should “have trainings...to address implicit bias...that can address different cultural competencies.”

MS2 also discussed the need to address what is taught in the classroom. He stated schools need “to incorporate various things from all the spectrum—from teaching history to discussing African Americans’ contributions to science and society.” MS2 made it clear that he was not advocating for a rewrite of history, but rather asking that schools “work to make sure that more of the story is told, from an inclusive standpoint.” HS1 expressed a similar sentiment when he discussed the need for “more literature geared toward African American male students.”

In addition to training school staff, two participants discussed ways in which African American male students could benefit from training. HS2 discussed a program in which his campus participated. HS2 described it as an “annual conference” where African American students heard from guest speakers in rotations. He stated it included “FBI agents and former graduates of the district who went on to be doctors, lawyers, authors, or politicians.” HS2 stated one time they “were able to get a professional athlete to come and speak to the students.” The goal of this conference was to “encourage the kids to do their best and not become a statistic. The conference focused on what the kids could be, coming from people who looked like them and had been in their shoes before.”

Although MS2 did not discuss a formal program, he did discuss something similar to the conference HS2 described. MS2 noted something was needed “to help African American male students, something that would help them see their potential.” He stated “some kind of program, or class, or some kind of session that they could go to and see other kids who look like them, being successful in the same place where they are tasked to be...would make a difference.” MS2 stated this could be taught in a class, but

emphasized that it needed to be “taught by people who really believe it,” and not something that teachers say “just because some slides tell them to.”

Connectedness. During their initial interviews, none of the participants cited connectedness as a program or procedure that would contribute to the success of African American male students during the transition to high school. After analyzing the data, I realized that each participant only identified one program or procedure. However, after I emailed the participants a copy of the transcript to review (a step delineated in Chapter III), two of the participants responded that they also wanted to mention the necessity of getting African American male students connected to something on their campuses.

Because this theme was identified earlier in the chapter, it is understandable that the participants would assign value to connectedness as a program or procedure necessary for the success of contemporary African American male students. HS2 contributed a large amount of his success during the freshman transition to being connected to clubs and athletic teams. He also focused on this aspect throughout the interview. His perception is that schools need to focus on getting African American male students connected to the school. Additionally, MS1 and MS2 both discussed being involved in school activities during their transition.

As it pertains to contemporary African American male students, the participants identified belonging to a club, team, or organization as important. HS1 discussed how his school attempts to get students connected to the school. He stated, “That’s why, at our school, we try to get every kid involved in something.” He detailed his school’s summer orientation program where clubs and organizations line the main hallway and give out

information and recruit students. “Kids will find a way to occupy their time if we don’t find one for them” he stated about getting kids connected to a club or organization.

As a former coach, I have witnessed the role connectedness can have in a student’s academic career. I witnessed students work hard to be successful in class only to become disengaged from school if they became academically ineligible. Some students need the incentive of an extra-curricular activity to keep them interested in school. HS1 described this tactic as using “carrots and sticks.” Administrators should be diligent in connecting students to clubs and organizations on their campus.

Summary

In this chapter, a discussion about the interviews conducted was presented and a summary of the data was presented for each of the research questions. When discussing what contributed to the participants’ success during the freshman transition, two themes emerged: positive adult relationships and connectedness. Data related to the participants’ perceptions of the difficulties faced by contemporary African American male students during the freshman transition were presented. Additionally, data related to the participants’ perceptions of what helps African American male students successfully complete the freshman transition were presented.

Three themes emerged as programs or procedures identified by the participants as necessary to help African American male students successfully navigate the freshman transition. These themes were mentors, training for staff and students, and connectedness. A description of each was provided along with the voices of the participants describing why these programs and procedures would be beneficial. Data

were triangulated using data from school counselors. In the next chapter, implications and recommendations will be discussed.

CHAPTER V

Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations

The purpose of this collective case study was to gain an understanding of the Grade 8 to Grade 9 transition experience for African American male students in one suburban school district. Additionally, I wanted to explore what programs and procedures African American male administrators thought would be beneficial for African American male students during their transition to high school. A review of previous literature, as described in Chapter II, demonstrated that the freshman transition remains an understudied phenomenon (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013; Hertzog & Morgan, 1998; Smith et al., 2006). Furthermore, the voice of African American male administrators about the transition experience was not found in the current literature at the time of this dissertation.

As described in Chapters III and IV, I collected data by interviewing four African American male administrators in one suburban district. Additional data were gathered from two of the participants during the member check process. By utilizing the voices of African American administrators, an important stakeholder group has been added to the freshman transition literature.

To triangulate the data gathered from the participants, data were also gathered from school counselors. The counselors who completed the questionnaire were employed at schools where a participant/administrator worked. Triangulation was conducted to increase the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings.

In this chapter, a synthesis of the findings detailed in Chapter IV is presented. I will begin by discussing the relationship of the findings to the conceptual framework.

Next, a discussion will be presented as it relates to each research question independently. Recommendations for practice and recommendations for future research endeavors precede the concluding remarks of the study.

Discussion of the Findings in Relation to the Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework, which guided this study was critical race theory. As stated in Chapter I, CRT advocates for the disenfranchised by acknowledging that historical injustices contribute to inequality today (Rector-Aranda, 2016). In education, inequality has been demonstrated in quantitative data such as dropout rates (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2018b) and gaps in academic achievement (Fraga & Slate, 2020).

In this study, one of the four participants, MS2, discussed elements of CRT in detail. In Chapter IV, a recount of one of MS2's personal experiences was shared. Furthermore, all of the participants discussed ways in which CRT is currently applied in education. HS1 discussed the implicit bias against African American students who do not have literature "geared toward" them. HS2, MS1, and MS2 all discussed the historical context of non-equitable education for African Americans and the status of issues such as disproportionately higher rates of poverty and higher rates of dropping out. MS2 also shared how the history of discrimination in education has led to a negative view about education on the part of many African Americans. Further research could be focused on the views African American male students have about education.

Discussion of the Findings in Relation to the Research Questions

Three research questions steered this study. I examined the perceptions that African American male administrators had of the freshman transition experience for contemporary African American male students. Administrators at the high school and middle school levels were interviewed. Moreover, I sought to understand what programs or procedures the participants believed would benefit African American male students as they transitioned to high school.

Research Question 1. The first research question sought to find out the perceptions African American male high school administrators had of the freshman transition for contemporary African American male students. When discussing the freshman transition for African American male students, both high school administrators acknowledged the difficulties contemporary students encounter. Both participants identified barriers that were external to the high school campus.

HS1 identified a lack of preparation by the middle school as a barrier to success for contemporary African American male students during the freshman transition. He believed that African American males enter high school with gaps related to academics. HS1 also discussed the ways in which middle schools do prepare African American male students for the “norms, rules, policies, and procedures” that are present on the high school campus.

HS2 focused on two barriers as well. In HS2’s experience, African American male students who have experienced success in an educational environment are more likely to do so when they enter high school. HS2 also spent time addressing the lack of a “constant” in the life of African American male students. HS2 believed the lack of a

constant is one of the primary reasons for the difficulties encountered by African American males.

The perceptions of both participants have been identified by previous researchers, as cited in Chapter II (e.g., Orrock & Clark, 2018; Stayhorn, 2009; United States Census Bureau, 2019). Furthermore, their perceptions were corroborated by the counselor questionnaires. One of the counselors stated that many freshmen begin their high school career with academic gaps. Another counselor responded that lack of parental involvement is a contributing factor to a difficult transition for students.

Both high school administrators addressed factors they believed would benefit African American male students. HS1 posited that the primary factor is the emphasis of the importance of education coming from home. HS2 stated that student involvement is a vital component of success during the freshman transition. HS2 also discussed the necessity for schools to take a proactive approach in ensuring all students are a part of the school.

Regarding the Black Lives Matter movement, both high school participants discussed the positive and negative effects. Both participants believed that the movement has increased awareness to racial issues in the United States and has increased the initiative of African American students to research issues and advocate for themselves. Both administrators expressed that one pitfall is that too many students are finding inaccurate information and that the movement has led to White students and African American students “drawing a line in the sand,” according to HS1.

Research Question 2. The second research question sought to find out the perceptions African American male administrators have of the freshman transition for

contemporary African American male students. When discussing the freshman transition for African American male students, both middle school administrators acknowledged the difficulties students encounter. Whereas the high school administrators focused on barriers to success that were outside of the school's control, both middle school administrators focused on barriers within the school's control.

MS1 discussed an array of issues including the size of the school and life-course changes, both cited in the literature in Chapter II (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013; Neild, 2007). MS1 acknowledged that high schools have instituted transition programs but believed they did not sufficiently prepare African American male students for the realities of high school. As mentioned in Chapter IV, the programs MS1 referenced were those the counselors identified as currently existing on their campuses.

MS2 believed that the transition experience for African American male students was dependent on several factors. He specifically mentioned the differences that would exist for African American male students making the transition in a suburban area, as compared to those who make the transition in an urban area. MS2 also believed the transition experience for African American males was dependent on the demographic composition of the student body at the school attended.

Both middle school administrators also discussed the cultural mismatch that exists between schools and African American male students. MS1 also stated that he believed "recent happenings in society...have muddied the waters" for contemporary African American male students as they transition to high school. MS2 believed that the strictly "middle-class" approach to education was a problem for some African American male students.

MS1 and MS2 also discussed factors they believed help African American male students succeed. Both participants discussed the school staff as essential elements. MS1 recounted how he did not have a single African American male teacher until he was in college. In his view, having teachers who “look like” the students they teach would be a benefit to African American male students. MS2 addressed school staff and believed that educators who have been trained on teaching a diverse population would be of benefit to African American male students.

Regarding the Black Lives Matter movement, the middle school administrators discussed their beliefs on how it affected the freshman transition for African American male students. Interestingly, MS1 believed the movement has confused a lot of African American male students; whereas MS2 felt it has caused students to feel more “comfortable speaking out” on issues going on in society. MS2 further believed that the Black Lives Matter movement brought salience to race relations in the United States.

Research Question 3. The third research question sought to find out what programs or procedures African American male administrators believe would be beneficial for contemporary African American male students during the freshman transition. Three themes emerged from the data and were discussed in Chapter IV. Mentors, training, and connectedness were the three themes.

As detailed in Chapter IV, the most common theme to emerge from the data was the need for mentors for contemporary African American male students during the freshman transition. Two participants specifically mentioned mentor programs as something that would benefit contemporary African American male students during the freshman transition. At various points in their interviews, all four participants discussed

the importance of positive relationships with adults during the freshman transition.

Although the interviews did not produce a firm understanding of how a mentor program should be structured, the participants believed the need for a formalized mentor program of some sort is needed. HS1 discussed an existing barrier to implementation of a mentor program, namely the lack of African American males to serve as mentors. With this knowledge however, HS1 believed mentorships were important.

As with mentors, all four participants discussed the need for training. Two participants directly addressed this theme and the other two addressed training through answers to other questions. When discussing who to train, the participants believed that staff who work with African American males should be trained. Two of the participants also discussed the need to train African American male students as well. In both instances, the participants believed that cultural differences should be the primary focus of trainings.

Three of the participants discussed the role connectedness played during their own transition to high school. Although not initially cited by any of the participants during their interview, HS1 and MS1 replied during the member check step that connecting African American male students to some aspect of the school is important during the freshman transition. As students begin their high school career, they experience more opportunities for connectedness (Clark et al., 2016). From my own experience as a high school educator, some examples to connect with others include athletic teams, fine arts programs, honors societies, yearbook, and other clubs and organizations. Two of the campuses at which I have worked had organizations to facilitate connectedness for African American students.

Collectively, the participants believed instituting programs aligned with the themes presented would benefit African American male students during the freshman transition. Although these themes do not present an answer for every situation, utilizing a combination of these themes could increase the likelihood of success for African American male students. As such, each theme is discussed in the following section.

Recommendations for Practice

Findings from my research have applications for current practitioners. The suggestions recommended in this section can be implemented by campus and district personnel. These recommendations come from the data gathered from the participants as detailed in Chapter IV. Recommendations are made in relation to the themes of mentorships, staff training programs, and student connectedness.

Mentorships. The data gathered from the participants pointed overwhelmingly to the need for mentor programs for African American male students. As detailed in Chapter IV, the participants discussed the importance of positive adult relationships to their own success during their transition to high school. Additionally, three participants connected mentorships to the success for contemporary African American male students during their transition to high school. As such, it is recommended that districts implement mentorship programs.

Ideally, school districts should create a district-level position which will focus largely on mentoring underserved populations of the student body. Preferably, this would be a new position which would focus on the needs addressed in this research, a mentor program being one. This district-level employee would not mentor students but would run a district-wide program. I believe that having a position devoted to this cause will

ensure the program is executed with fidelity. Too often, programs that campuses try to execute on their own get lost in the shuffle of the day-to-day business of a campus; I am fearful a mentor program could likewise fall victim. A district administrator, however, could keep a mentorship program focused. Furthermore, a district-level administrator could objectively assess the effectiveness of the mentor program.

Additionally, there should be a campus-based coordinator for each campus. This individual could be an administrator, a counselor, or a teacher. Their function as the coordinator would be twofold. First, they would need to identify the students who need a mentor. Once identified, the coordinator would connect the identified students with a mentor. The identification of students should begin in Grade 5, as students are transitioning to middle school. Campus coordinators should annually review student profiles to determine if other students should be included into the program.

The campus coordinator would also be responsible for coordinating campus events for the mentors and mentees. Events would include presenting on-going professional development for the mentors. Additionally, the campus coordinator could schedule events for the mentees. Symposiums, meet-and-greets, resume workshops, and community outings should all be considered as potential events for the students.

The mentors, as discussed in Chapter IV, ideally should be representative of the population they would be mentoring (e.g., African American males). The mentors should be willing to invest in the students and have limited work duties (e.g., coaching, club sponsorships) outside of the mentor program. Because mentors would undoubtedly spend time outside of the school day investing in their mentees, a stipend should be offered.

The suggestions made thus far could pose difficulties for districts, primarily in the areas of funding and staffing. Neither of these problems are novel for educators. Likewise, neither should be the reason for failing to implement a mentorship program. The importance of a mentorship program is clear and the consequences for inaction (e.g., dropping out, increased likelihood of undesired consequences) are too grave for districts to ignore the underserved populations in their schools. What follows are recommendations to address the funding and staffing issues.

A mentorship program does not need to be expensive. Although I recommend a new, district-level position be created to focus on the needs of the underserved subpopulations of the district, a current district-level employee could assume the responsibility of a mentor program in their current capacity. Alternatively, the district could use a campus-based administrator to oversee the district program.

Depending on the size of the district, providing stipends to mentors could also pose a limitation. Even though stipends should be offered, the perception I gathered from the participants is that the need is of such importance that some teachers would volunteer if a program was formalized. I believe the realities faced by contemporary African American male students are salient enough to attract mentors, even if the district is not able to offer a stipend.

Staffing is another limiting factor when it comes to establishing a mentor program for African American male students. Staffing was a problem mentioned by HS1. Other participants also discussed the need for contemporary African American male students to have someone who “looks like them” (MS2) and has “been in [their] situation” (MS1). At the same time, many campuses do not have a proportionate number of African

American male employees, based on their campus' student demographic composition. I offer two suggestions to address staffing.

First, I recommend school districts, with a large African American population, recruit African American males to become teachers. Hiring African American males can be done by recruiting from Colleges of Education at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). School districts should attempt to partner with HBCUs to recruit recent and soon-to-be graduates to their schools. Districts should also make every effort to attend job fairs hosted by HBCUs and those in urban areas. A concentrated effort to this end could prove fruitful for districts looking to increase the number of African American faculty members present on their campus.

A second recommendation would be to partner with a local community college or university to find mentors. Many colleges and universities have African American Student Organizations, or a similar association, which could provide a network of potential mentors. Other community organization, such as churches or community service clubs could also be contacted to find adults who would be willing to donate their time and resources to mentor African American male students. HS2 discussed one such program that he helped facilitate, as mentioned in Chapter IV. This recommendation addresses both of the limiting factors mentioned in this section.

It is important to note that not every African American male student will need a mentor; the broader theme of positive adult relationships should be considered. Many students have already cultivated positive relationships with adults. For some students their "constant," in the words of HS2, is at home. For other African American male students, they are connected to the school and have already cultivated a positive

relationship with a coach, a counselor, a club sponsor, or another adult on the campus. Students who meet these criteria will more than likely be successful without a formal mentor. However, students who do not have a “constant” in their life, and those who are not connected, are likely to “slip through the cracks,” as HS1 stated. These are the students who schools must identify and work to ensure they have the relationships needed to be successful. As mentioned previously, identifying who these students are early in their educational career would be in the best interest of the students.

Staff training. A second theme derived from the data was the need for school staff to receive training. School districts and the Texas Education Agency require teachers to complete professional development courses as a prerequisite to renewing their certification. Many high school teachers attend trainings about content-specific pedagogies and strategies to use in their classroom. Without discounting the importance and necessity of these trainings, districts should strive to implement trainings that will address the needs of African American male students, particularly during their transition to high school. Specifically, the data revealed that trainings addressing implicit bias and culturally relevant teaching are needed.

All of the participants mentioned or referenced the cultural disconnect between the ways in which schools operate and the norms of African American males. MS2 most directly addressed this issue as he discussed schools having a “middle class version of how things should be.” MS2 continued by saying that middle class values “aren’t taught in all circles.” I recommend trainings that focus on African American culture to help educators understand the upbringing of their students. To better understand what specific

cultural elements should be addressed is trainings, districts should work with their African American administrators and teachers.

The example provided in Chapter IV with students being told by teachers to “look them in [their] eyes when [they] are speaking” is one illustration of the cultural disconnect between educators and their students. As the common colloquial expression goes, educators need to meet students where they are. To begin, educators need to learn where their students are.

To accomplish this goal, educators need to know more than the academic capabilities of their students; educators need to know their students “culturally, emotionally, linguistically, physically, and behaviorally” (Rudenstine et al., 2018, p. 1). Staff trainings should be conducted to bridge these disconnects. I believe once educators have a fuller picture of where their students are coming from “culturally, emotionally, linguistically, physically, and behaviorally” (Rudenstine et al., 2018, p. 1), they will better understand that in many situations their students are not trying to be disrespectful—they were just taught a different version of what respect is.

Connectedness. The importance of African American male students being connected to some aspect of their school during the freshman transition cannot be stressed enough. Three of the four participants discussed the role connectedness played in their own success. Furthermore, two of the participants responded during the member check process and directly identified connectedness as important for contemporary African American male students during the freshman transition.

Based on the data, school districts should develop a process whereby every student would be involved in an extra or co-curricular activity. As students enter high

school, they experience an expanded array of athletic teams, organizations, and other clubs (Clark et al., 2016). Although schools encourage students to participate, no mechanisms are in place to compel students to do so. As such, schools should develop ways to reach out to their at-risk students and connect them to a club or organization. If a mentorship program is established, mentors can work with students to find out where their interests are. Perhaps the mentees of a single mentor can become connected with one another.

Additionally, schools should implement clubs and organizations that will facilitate connectedness for African American male students. Black Student Unions and step teams are examples of organizations that can facilitate such connectedness. Schools should also seek the opinions of their African American male students for other ideas.

Recommendations for Future Research

With this collective case study, I explored the freshman transition for African American male students. This study was accomplished by examining the perceptions of African American male administrators in one suburban school district. In this section, opportunities for future research are discussed in this section. Two specific areas for future research will be discussed: building on this study and exploring mentor programs.

Building on this study. There are multiple ways in which this study can be expanded. The current study included four participants. Future researchers could replicate this study with more participants to determine if the themes derived from the data are consistent. Additionally, the participants worked at schools in a middle-class, suburban area. Ascertaining the perceptions of African American male administrators in an urban environment could provide valuable information. MS2 discussed how the

freshman transition experience would be different for African American male students in suburban areas than it would be for those in urban areas. Discovering the perceptions of African American male administrators who work with students in an urban setting could prove beneficial when addressing the needs of students.

This research could also be replicated by using different subpopulations. According to the Pew Research Center (2020), Hispanic Americans are the fastest growing subpopulation in the United States and were projected to be the largest minority group by the end of 2020. As such, a study focused on the needs of this group could be beneficial. I recommend interviewing Hispanic American male administrators to ascertain their perceptions of the freshman transition for contemporary Hispanic American male students. Similar outcomes and implications could result Hispanic American males during the freshman transition.

Additionally, the theme of connectedness should be further explored. Multiple participants identified connectedness as important to their own success during the freshman transition. However, connectedness did not emerge as a theme for the success of contemporary African American male students until the member check process. Research as to how educators are getting contemporary African American male students involved in extra-curricular activities could prove to be beneficial.

Finally, I recommend replicating this study to determine the needs unique to female students during the freshman transition. Researchers (Butler-Barnes & Inniss-Thompson, 2020; Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2020) have demonstrated that African American female students have a disproportionate representation when it comes to exclusionary discipline. This study can be conducted focusing on female students

collectively or by race/ethnicity. Understanding the unique needs of female students can help improve their experiences during the freshman transition.

Mentor programs. As the dominant theme from the data, mentor programs for African American male students should be further examined. Before districts can seek to implement a program, they must first have an understanding of how it should be structured and operated. I offer two suggestions for research in this vein.

First, researchers should conduct an in-depth literature review on mentor programs. Attention should be given to those studies in which high school students were the mentees. Also, studies in which the mentees were African American males should be analyzed. Because mentor programs emerged as a theme and was not a focus of the study from the outset, I did not initially review literature about existing programs. Initial searches to determine what previous researchers have unearthed about mentor programs with African American males during the freshman transition yielded few results at the time of this dissertation. One article discussed mentorships that students initiated on their own or developed naturally (Wittrup et al., 2019). Additionally, one dissertation which discussed a leadership program for African American males, including mentorships, was located (Summers, 2018). As a result, more studies about programs could be helpful.

Second, researchers should seek out programs that are currently in practice and conduct a program evaluation. Practitioners would benefit from knowing what programs are currently in practice. Researchers and practitioners would also benefit from a description of the trials and successes current programs are facing.

Application of these two recommendations could lead a district to conducting a pilot mentor program. If a district were to do so, they could report on the successes and

setbacks of their program. A report of this nature would benefit the study district and other districts that wish to better serve African American male students during the freshman transition.

Conclusion

The purpose of this collective case study was to gain an understanding of the Grade 8 to Grade 9 transition experience for African American male students in one suburban school district. Interviews were conducted with four African American male administrators to understand their perceptions of the freshman transition. The participants offered a unique perspective as participants who have a shared lived experience with the subpopulation being studied. The participants offered recommendations for programs and procedures that schools should implement to assist African American male students during the freshman transition. Their recommendations came as a result of reflection on their own experiences during the freshman transition, as well as on their experiences working with contemporary African American males as they transition to high school. The responses of the participants were triangulated with a questionnaire, which was administered to counselors.

According to the data, the participants believed African American male students would benefit from three programs and procedures during the freshman transition. These programs and procedures were mentors, trainings, and connectedness. A detailed explanation of the participants' responses was offered in Chapter IV and recommendations for application and implementation were offered in this chapter.

Addressing the needs of all students is of the utmost importance. Focusing on the disproportionate rate at which African American males are dropping out of school should

be a primary emphasis. Concentrating on populations that are underserved in education and society will not only better that population's situation; it can better the situation of society as a whole. Understanding the needs of African American male students during the freshman transition, an understudied topic (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013), can help educators prepare students for a successful high school career, thus decreasing their likelihood of dropping out of school. Adding the voices of African American male administrators, as individuals with a similar lived experience (i.e., African American male students during the freshman transition), to the existing literature is an important step.

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APPENDIX A

Administrator Interview Questions

1. What do you remember about your transition to high school?
 - a. Do you remember experiencing any specific difficulties during the transition to high school?
 - b. To what do you attribute your ability to succeed during the transition to high school?
 - i. Do you remember any specific freshman transition programs your school had in place?
2. What are your perceptions of the freshman transition for African American males today?
 - a. What factors do you think contribute to the success of contemporary African American male students?
 - b. What difficulties do you think African American males experience that other students do not?
3. What programs or procedures do you think would be beneficial for African American male students as they transition to high school?
4. Why do you think some African American male students are able to make the transition to high school successfully while others struggle?
5. Do you think the COVID-19 pandemic and/or the Black Lives Matter movement have impacted the freshman transition for African American male students this year?
 - a. How so, or why not?

APPENDIX B

Counselor Questionnaire

1. Are you currently a counselor at the high school or middle school level?
2. What are the barriers students at your school experience as they transition to high school?
3. What programs or strategies are in place on your campus to help alleviate the issues related to the freshman transition? Please briefly explain each one, as needed.
4. How would you measure a successful transition to high school?
5. How do you think COVID-19 has impacted the freshman transition this school year?
6. (For high school counselors only) What percentage of your repeat freshman (those who were freshmen last year but did not receive enough credits to be classified as sophomores at the beginning of the school year) are African American males?

VITA

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ACADEMIC AND PROFESSIONAL AWARDS

Top 25 Most Influential Educators of DeSoto ISD

Mirabeau B. Lamar Award for Excellence in Civic Education, Texas Masons

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIP

Texas Association of Secondary School Principals

Pi Sigma Alpha (Political Science National Honors Society)