Fall 2021

Against All Odds: Understanding African American Males' Perspectives on the Path to Graduation at an Alternative School

Devin Randolph

AGAINST ALL ODDS: UNDERSTANDING AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES'
PERSPECTIVES ON THE PATH TO GRADUATION AT AN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL

by

Devin Randolph

Bachelor of Science
Claflin University, 2007

Master of Public Administration
Cornell, University, 2012

_____

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in

Foundations of Education

College of Education

University of South Carolina

2022

Accepted by:

Allison D. Anders, Major Professor

Gloria Boutte, Committee Member

Daniella Cook, Committee Member

Paval Shah, Committee Member

Tracey L. Weldon, Interim Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work and this degree to every person who provided support and encouragement as I worked my way through this process. To my parents, Raymond and Lizzette, you have always pushed me to exceed my potential. If it were not for the lessons that you instilled in me as I grew up, I would never have had the drive to pursue my Doctor of Philosophy. Thank you for always challenging me and driving me to be the best version of myself.

To my wife and best friend, Nakisha, I owe you a large part of everything that I am and have accomplished. You have made me better. Thank you for your patience and unyielding support during my late-night writing sessions, the many times I've wanted to throw in the towel and for reminding me of my WHY. You are my biggest supporter. I am so honored to have you in my life. This study would not even exist if it had not been for your continued encouragement and belief in my ability to succeed. Everything that I have done has been for you. While thanking you, I can't forget my bonus parents, Bennie and Sandra Scott, your PRAYERS alone have given me strength in my times of weakness.

The promise I made to my Lord and Savior years ago to change my life and community for the better, is coming to pass. Thank you Abba for hearing my heart and providing unconditional grace and love to me. I am forever humbled by works you are doing.

I know I have made my late grandparents proud.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are a host of people that I would like to thank for helping me throughout my journey through the doctoral program.

First, I would like to thank Dr. Allison Anders for her guidance, support, and expertise as I crafted this work. Thank you so much for the encouragement that you gave and know that your support has been essential to my success.

I would also like to thank Dr. Gloria Boutte, Dr. Daniella Cook, Dr. Payal Shah and for their willingness to serve on my committee and for the feedback they provided to make this work its best.

Dr. Kara Brown, thank you for the time and attention you provided while I was in the early stages of developing this work. Your feedback and reassurance as I navigated this process were extremely timely and helpful.

Dr. Doyle Stevick, thank you for agreeing to be a member of my support network from the moment I declared my intention to seek a doctoral degree. You have been an invaluable source of information and encouragement.

ABSTRACT

The researcher completed a critical, descriptive, single case study about African American male students' experiences on the path to graduation at an alternative school in the southeast. Informed by scholarship on majoritarian narratives and counter narratives from Critical Race Theory (CRT), the researcher coded and analyzed data from individual interviews, a focus group, and an art-based project to answer three research questions: 1. How do African American males describe their perspectives on their placement at an alternative school? 2. How do African American male students describe their paths to graduation, including defining moments? 3. What and who do African American male students identify as important in order to succeed in the alternative school? The theme of the case was: "We are dreaming again": A Photographer, a Mathematician, Basketball Player, and a Mechanic. There were four themes from the individual interviews and focus group: Theme 1: "I made the decision not to fail": Refusing to Fail and Support from Important Others; Theme 2: "I believe society is designed for us to fail": Race, Racism, African American Male Success; and Theme 3: "You have to take the opportunity to be more than any negative circumstances no matter what": Rejecting Labels and Asking for Help; and Theme 4: "I am filled with hope, dreams, determination": Resiliency and the Desire to Succeed." The theme of the case was: "We are dreaming again": A Photographer, a Mathematician, Basketball Player, and a Mechanic. The researcher provides recommendations, including adequate funding supported by local, state, and federal leaders, preparation for and investment in creating shared, positive relationships between

teachers and students, leadership-faculty-staff support teams and collaboration with students, engagement with external organizations that can provide services to students in alternative education programs and engage teachers who work at alternative schools.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CRT... ....Critical Race Theory

COPS..Community Oriented Policing Services

DAEPs.. Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs

LCAS ....Learning Center Achievement School

NEA ....National Education Association

SEP..Student Education Plan

SROs .... School Resource Officers

STTP .... School-to-Prison Pipeline

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

My personal experiences with an alternative school and my former incarceration for a non-violent offense have shaped my thinking about the collateral consequences of a criminal history record. Despite the rehabilitative approaches of my decision after release, I encountered negative experiences at important levels of my transition. Even within my capacity as a doctoral student, I am greatly concerned about "otherness", or "alterity", and how this notion gets acted out on the societal stage. My decision to focus my research on lived experiences of African American males on the path to graduation from alternative schools stemmed from personal and professional experiences.

Black students are over-represented in alternative schools/programs and the school-to-prison pipeline (Cole, 2021), and research that centers their experiences with schooling in alternative schools/programs is needed. The maintenance of the school-to-prison pipeline is dependent on multiple factors; prominent among them are disciplinary policies and practices within schools that put students into contact with law enforcement. The school-to-prison pipeline is a process of criminalizing youth, predominately youth of Color, which mirrors the over-representation of this group in U.S. prisons and jails (Cole, 2021).

The School to Prison Pipeline

The school-to-prison pipeline (or STPP) refers to:

> the confluence of education policies in under-resourced public schools and a
> predominantly punitive juvenile justice system that fails to provide education and
> mental health services for our most at-risk students and drastically increases the
> likelihood that these children will end up with a criminal record rather than a high
> school diploma. (Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010)

The school-to-prison pipeline was supported by budgetary decisions made by the U.S.
government. The key policies and practices that created and now maintain the school-to-
prison pipeline include zero-tolerance policies that mandate harsh punishments for both
minor and major infractions, exclusion of students from schools through
punitive suspensions and expulsions, and the presence of police on campus as school
resource officers (Cole, 2021). STPP increases out-of-class time and is based on
retributive, punitive measures. Increased police presence, harsh interactions between
Student Resource Officers (SROs) and students, and zero-tolerance policies are
conditions of the school-to-prison pipeline.

Elements contributing to increased contact between African American male children
and the criminal justice system stemmed directly from the classroom use of "zero
tolerance" policies and a school's use of Student Resource Officers (SRO) (Cole, 2021).
The Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS), a division of the United States
Department of Justice, defined a school resource officer as a "career law enforcement
officer, with sworn authority, deployed in community-oriented policing, and assigned by
the employing police department or agency to work in collaboration with school and

2

community-based organizations (COPS, 2018 p. 1)". The incorporation of SROs has direct implications in the school-to-prison pipeline because, in schools with an SRO, student behavior is criminalized. According to a Justice Policy Institute (2011) report, even when controlling for a school district's poverty level, schools with SROs had five times as many arrests for disorderly conduct as schools without them (Theriot, 2009).

Ewing (2002) defined zero-tolerance policies as "measures implemented that requires school officials to give students a specific, consistent, and harsh punishment, usually suspension or expulsion, when certain rules are broken. The punishment applies regardless of the circumstances, the reasons for the behavior (such as self-defense), or the student's history of disciplinary problems" (p. 52). Zero-tolerance policies were originally introduced to school districts as the solution to ensuring safe campuses as it relates to weapons, drugs, and violent acts on school grounds (Skiba & Peterson, 2002). A report published by Russell et. al. (2006), suggested that zero-tolerance school discipline policies have gained tremendous momentum in middle schools and high schools since they were introduced in the late 1980s. This report looked at existing research to answer three questions: How does zero-tolerance discipline affect individual students and the overall school environment? Have these policies helped create a school-to-prison pipeline? If the costs outweigh the benefits, are there more effective alternatives?

There are no applicable studies that demonstrated that an increase in student suspensions led to a decrease in classroom disruptions. Morevoer, although zero-tolerance policies were initially designed to respond to possession of a weapon, in recent years, only five percent of suspensions or expulsions nationally were for this offense. In

addition, policies that require teachers or administrators to push students out of school have had life-long adverse effects that severely limit a young person's future potential. Lastly, neither adults nor young people have benefited from zero-tolerance policies. In *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools*, Monique Morris (2015) discussed biases associated with Black girls experiences with schooling and punishment. She posited that these experiences were correlated to the ways that zero-tolerance polices are inherently implicit and explicit at the intersections of racism and sexism.

Well-established research has reflected the unjust role that administrators, teachers, and policies of public schools have played in contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline crisis (Russell et.al, 2000). In an American Psychological Association (2008) report, a task force gathered data related to certain assumptions that coincided with zero-tolerance policies. One of the assumptions was that students would be deterred from breaking the rules with swift, strict, and uniform zero-tolerance punishments. Further, the assumption was that such punishments, in turn, improved the overall behavior of the student and decreased disciplinary infractions in the school. However, the task force's research found that assumption to be false. Moreover, school suspension and expulsion are moderately associated with a higher likelihood of school dropout and failure to graduate on time (American Psychological Association, 2008).

The different language used when describing students leaving school revealed different perspectives on the roles of such policies and their failures. "Push out", a term coined by George Dei (1996), a professor of education, "refers to practices that contribute to students dropping out...Students who are pushed out experience diminished academic opportunities and social alienation" (p. 1). Accordingly, they are pushed into substandard

alternative schools and GED programs, which may compromise future academic and job success. In contrast, school "dropout" removes the "practices" of schools and refers to only to the individual who has left school without obtaining a minimal credential - most often a diploma in secondary education (De Witte et al., 2013).

African American males are more likely to be suspended and expelled from school during the K-12 years than their White counterparts (Booker & Mitchell, 2011). Implicit bias in administering discipline happened as early as preschool. According to research conducted in 2016 by the Yale Child Study Center, a researcher used eye-tracking technology and found that preschool teachers "show a tendency to more closely observe Black students, and especially boys, when challenging behaviors are expected" (p. 4). The study suggested that both White and black teachers spend more time focusing on their black students, expecting misbehavior. All total, "42% of the teachers believed the Black boy needed the most attention, while 34% indicated the White boy, 13% identified the White girl, and 10% chose the black girl (Gillman, et. al 2016)."

The likelihood of encountering the criminal justice system increased when a Black child has been expelled from school and assigned to an alternative school setting (Booker & Mitchell, 2011). The National Education Association (NEA) reported that a Black male born in 2001 had a one in three chance of going to prison in his lifetime; a Latino male had a one in six chance, and a White male a one in 17 chance (Cradle to Prison Pipeline Campaign, 2008). According to the Education Department's Office of Civil Rights (2010), Black students are suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than White students. Zeiderberg and Schiraldi (2002) suggested that just over half

of African American males who do not complete high school have been incarcerated at least once by 30.

The Education of African American Children

African American students are navigating multiple intersecting crises in their education. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) coined the term "education debt" to describe the cumulative impact of fewer resources and other harm directed at African American students. She explained, "the education debt is the foregone schooling resources that we could have (should have) been investing in (primarily) low income kids, which deficit leads to a variety of social problems (e.g. crime, low productivity, low wages, low labor force participation) that require on-going public investment" (p. 4).

According to the Southern Regional Education Board (2021), the national high school graduation rate for African American males is 59%, while the graduation rate for White males is 80% (Kim et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2011; Skiba et al. , 2002). In 2020, South Carolina's graduation rate was 81.0% (South Carolinal Department of Education). Nationally, African American males represented roughly 76% of high school students who graduated with a regular high school diploma within four years of starting ninth grade (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Eighty percent of the districts in the southeast have at least one alternative school (Kleiner et al., 2002).

In particular, African American males experience an over-representation in special education (Connor & Ferri, 2005), under representation in advanced placement courses (Corra et al., 2011), low expectations by teachers (Hucks, 2011), and disparate implementation of discipline policies (Gregory et al., 2003; Gregory & Mosely, 2004)

which are catalysts in African American male presence in the school-to-prison pipeline. District and school personnel are more likely to label African American children with "emotional/behavioral" diagnostic labels (Hosp and Reschly, 2004) than their White counterparts. Four decades after the inception of special education, the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education programs continues to be an issue (Artiles et al., 2010; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Ford, 2012; Oswald et al., 1999; Skiba et al., 2008). The literature insisted overrepresentation stemmed from a collection of complex factors (Artiles & Trent, 1994; McKenna, 2013; Skiba et al., 2008; Zhang et al., 2014).

The intricate interplay between child, systematic practices, school environment, and teacher all work together to shape the problem (Donovan & Cross, 2002). This includes funding appropriations, which suggest that high-poverty districts that primarily serve students of Color receive less per student than the national average (Donovan & Cross, 2002). Lastly, standardized testing has created punitive consequences for schools systems, teachers, and administrators. Increased competition among school systems and low test scores serve as incentives to push lower performaning students out of school (Fabelo et al., 2011). Primary and secondary schools faced pressure and scrutiny of end-of-course testing scores to demonstrate growth and productivity. This pressure leads officials to suspend or expel underperforming students such as children of Color, non-English speakers, foster care or homeless students, and students with disabilities. Removing them from the testing pool bolsters performance scores and school rankings, rankings that are directly tied to their job performance and funding (Marsh et al., 2016).

The context of schooling African American students are enduring mulitple forms of trauma and violence. Understanding intersecting forms of violence African American students experience with schooling each day is imperative. Bryan and Boutte (2021) discussed five types of daily violence/traumas that Black children experience in schools: physical, symbolic, linguistic, curricular/pedagogical, and systemic. According to their research, these types of traumas/violence can be addressed through teachers genuinely engaging in "revolutionary love." This term means teachers have moved beyond the notion of fake love (Johnson et al., 2019) and are doing the heart work to support Black children in classrooms instead of trying to save them (as is customary for most White teachers to feel the need to do) (Bean-Folkes & Lewis Ellison, 2018). Seeing Black children, treating them as their own, and engaging in revolutionary love require teachers to become "co-conspirators" (Love, 2019). Co-conspirators are individuals who not only support Black children but also stand alongside them in the struggle to dismantle the types of anti-Black violence they face in schools. Boutte (2021) encouraged teachers to teach students of Color through an in-depth study of cultural groups and their knowledge.

Based on her research of effective teachers of African American students, Ladson-Billings (1995) proposed three goals on which these teachers' practices were grounded. First, teaching must yield academic success. Second, teaching must help students develop positive ethnic and cultural identities while simultaneously helping them achieve academically. Third, teaching must support students' ability "to recognize, understand, and critique current and social inequalities.

Building on the work of Ladson-Billings, Geneva Gay (2010) coined the term *culturally responsive teaching* to define an approach that emphasizes "using the

cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them" (p.143). More recently, culturally relevant pedagogy was expanded to develop a vision for *culturally sustaining pedagogy*. This expanded approach takes into account the many ways learners' identity and culture evolve. Collectively, these scholars have been advocating for approaches that position the cultures and identities of African American students at the heart of effective learning. They share a common outcome: defy the deficit model and ensure students see themselves and their communities reflected and valued in the content taught in school (Paris, 2012). We know student-centered, culturally-sustaining pedagogies work because African American students discussed a wide range of positive outcomes such as "a positive sense of racial and ethnic identity, improved attendance and academic attiudes among other outcomes (Phinney et al., 1997 p. 168).

Alternative Schools / Alternative Programs

The early alternative school movement was primarily supported and developed from the progressive education movement in the United States between the 1890s to the 1930s. By the mid-1970s, these schools, often called "free", "holistic", or "humanistic" schools, began opening at a remarkable rate in both the private and public sectors (Kozol, 1982). During the early 1980s, with the release of the *A Nation at Risk*, the world of alternative education shifted slowly towards advocating goals of social efficiency and growth, while also ignoring the large number of dropouts in U.S. education (Fine, 1991; Miller, 1992; Mills et al., 2013). However, as posited by Leone & Drakeford (1999) "present-day alternatives are typically serving students who are at risk for school failure or are disenfranchised from the traditional school system" (p. 87).

Statement of the Problem

9

Understanding how African American students navigate their schooling experiences is critical. Cornell West (2004) reminded us that "race remains one of the least undersood, yet most provocative and divisive, elements of our society" (p. 1). The "failure on the part of the researchers to critically examine the role that race plays in the pursuit of an equitable education may reveal insights into why previous measures have had a limted effectiveness for marginalized student populations" (Howard, 2013 p. 53). While each lever mentioned above in the STPP is important and worthy of study in order to identify ways to interrupt the crises African American males are navigating in their educational experiences; my intent for this project was to understand the ways African American males who are on the path to graduation from alternative school are making meaning of their educational experiences and their aspirations. African American male student voices are essential and central to understanding how they navigate a path to graduation, given the educational landscape they endure.

Research studies about their experiences and voices in alternative schools/programs and their paths to graduation are limited. A closer review of these programs/schools have varying educational outcomes represented through programs and data driven methods. A quantitative study was helpful when looking at programmatic changes and funding measures. However, a qualitative project created an opportunity to hear directly from students. In most cases, these voices are needed to help think through assumptions presented in some of the cotemporary national conversation about the achievement gap. Comparatively, African American students make up a substantial enrollment in alternative schools nationwide (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). I believe research about their matriculation problematizes negative perceptions presented

in research about this group. Often, national conversations about African American students almost immediately take up a deficit framework when discussing educational experiences and outcomes among this group of students. The "ideology of the larger society has always been about questioning the mental capacity of African Americans, about questioning Black intellectual competence" (Perry, 2003 p. 3).

Conceptual Framework

My investment in this topic and my search for a research methodology led me to develop an interest in the case study method. The case study is a strong choice when the phenomenon of interest is closely connected to the context in which it exists; in this project that was African American male experience on the path to graduation at an alternative school (Yin, 2009). Through this method, I engaged with an epistemological orientation that was critical. Informed by the analytical frame of majoritarian and counter-narratives in Critical Race Theory, I planned and analyzed data from a position designed to disrupt dominant, majoritarian narratives that used deficit perspectives to target youth tracked to alternative schools (Solórzano and Yosso, 2001). I analyzed the data for counterpoints and counter-narratives. This qualitative project used a case study approach with four African American male students from the Learning Center Achievement School (alternative center). Individual and group interviews and an art-based project were conducted. Additional information about protocols is provided in Chapter 3.

Description of Site Selection

The Learning Center Achievement School (LCAS) is considered one of the official alternative education programs located in rural South Carolina. It was recently

operated as a charter school and has undergone a name change to support the overarching mission. Students are placed at LCAS once they have been expelled or have excessive disciplinary behaviors from either a district-run school or charter school with the district. The Learning Center Achievement School placed emphasis on creating a safe and positive learning environment for its students. The school sets up individual learning plans and smaller learning communities for students. The learning communities are designed for the academic, socio-emotional needs, and vocational goals of students. Students attending LCAS are on a 4x4 block schedule. This schedule means that they take four classes per semester to gain of eight Carnegie Units towards high school graduation requirements per year.

Each classroom typically included seven to ten students, one teacher with six additional support staff, and one Coordinator of Dropout Prevention. There is cross collaboration between students at the high school level and an onsite counselor to complete a Student Education Plan (SEP). According to the South Carolina Department of Education, an SEP is a document that student and counselor create together showing the courses and activities planned to reach academic and career goals. LCAS encourages parent and community involvement thorough a leadership council that meets periodically with school leadership and quarterly meetings with teachers and staff.

Research Question (s)

The research questions are designed to move beyond familiar, majoritarian deficit approaches to African American students and instead focus on identifying experiences that lead to academic success in the alternative school environment as LCAS.

1. How do African American male students describe their perspectives on their

placements?

2. How do African American male students describe their paths to graduation, including defining moments?

3. What and who do African American male students identify as important in order to succeed in the alternative school?

   a. What resources do students identify as important?

   b. How are instructors identified as important?

   c. How are staff identified as important?

   d. Other people (parents/guardians; peers; friends)? other forms of support/resources identified as important

   e. What are your perceptions of your instructors?

   f. What different roles do your instructors play in your life?

   g. What different roles do staff of LCAS play in your life?

   h. Aside from instructors and support staff, who would you considered as an important trusted adult?

Significance of the Study

Crafting this project allowed me to investigate African American male experience on the path to graduation at Learning Center Achievement School. Additionally, it provided an opportunity to represent, from the students' perspectives, what worked most effectively in assisting them in achieving success in a non-traditional school setting, including their path to graduation. The research study was designed to understand these

practices and environmental contexts by centering African American male students' perspectives. Specifically, I was interested in how they described and enacted their path to graduation in an alternative school. Tyrone Howard's (2013) study, "The Counternarrative: Reframing Success for High Achieving Black and Latino Males," is an important contribution to the field. In this study, Howard reframed the familiar deficit framework by engaging in a 2-year study about how they view themselves, success and how these attributes contribute to their homes, schools, and communities. Findings from this study showed a variety of factors such as support from teachers, community, and positive role models played influential roles in how Black and Latino males perceived are important in their educational future. The study used a CRT lens to examine programs such as Teach for America. Howard argued that "the present racial divide in schools between teachers and students is imperative for teacher education programs to complicate and intensify the utility of race in their recruitment, retention, and support of teacher education practices and policies" (Howard, 2013 p. 536).

Limitations

According to the South Carolina Department of Education (2010), there are approximately 66 alternative schools/programs in South Carolina. African American males represent approximately 75% of students enrolled in alternative schools/programs. Although this project is smaller in scope and, therefore, not generalizable, it reflects schooling experiences of four African American male students in rich, layered detail – which was missing from the literature. Asking retrospective questions to students about their experiences with past schooling experiences means relying on memory. Generally, memory is the most robust when connected to recent events (Ariel et. al, 2021). Given that the students were still enrolled or recently enrolled at LCAS, often what they shared

14

was contemporaneous or in the recent past. However, a central commitment of mine was to member check each respective transcript and analyses with each participant for their accounting of accuracy (Glesne, 2007). I confirmed any factual information to which participants referred as well.

Delimitations

In this study, I explored only African American male high school students. Including young African American women or other racially under-represented high school students in this project would reflect broader schooling experiences of alternative education. However, focusing solely on African American male experiences on the path to graduation at an alternative school can bridge a significant gap in the literature. Future multiple methodology studies that incorporate mixed-method quantitative and qualitative approaches could focus on a broader range of experiences and/or compare one high school alternative school/program to another.

Organization of the Project

This project is organized as follows. First, in Chapter 2: Literature Review, I represent research on the educational experiences of African American males, including the school to prison pipeline, alternative school programs/experiences, and factors contributing to African American male educational experiences. In Chapter 3: Methodology, I describe the study's research methodology, including research design, data collection and analysis procedures. In Chapter 4: Findings, I represent findings. Chapter 5: Discussion, Implications, and Future Research include my discussion of the findings, implications from the research, and future research possibilities.

CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I represent a brief history of alternative education, review case studies of alternative schools/programs, and review modern and contemporary literature on educating African American children. Last, I discussed the importance of counterstorytelling (Solórzano & Yossi, 2002) within educational research and specifically as a methodology in research with African American males. In doing so, I hoped to understand the contexts of these schools and the students who attended them.

I do not intend to marginalize students or the schools by perpetuating definitions of "risk" or inferiority or to reproduce deficit perspectives. However, some literature used such language (i.e., "at-risk") and deficit frameworks. In this project, I worked against deficit perspectives in the literature (Dodge, 2008; Haegerich, Salerno & Bottoms, 2013; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Schiraldi & Ziedenberg, 2002) that affect how alternative schools are framed and described and how African American males attending them are viewed. Specifically, I aimed to review literature that provided context for the ways students might experience the Learning Center Achievement School (LCAS).

Alternative Schools: A Brief History

The early alternative school movement was primarily supported and developed from the progressive education movement in the United States between the 1890s to the 1930s. The dominant branches of the theories supporting the movement were: (1) developmental, child-centered instruction; (2) social reconstruction; (3) active citizen participation in all areas of life; and (4) the democratic organization of all public institutions (Schugurensky & Agguire, 2002). Miller (1992) attributed much of what became alternative education philosophy to Jean-Jacque Rousseau (1712-1778), Johnathan Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827), and Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852). Rousseau was a French philosopher who wrote about governance issues and human rights and hypothesized about an idea education centered around a child's engagement with the natural world. Pestalozzi was a Swiss educational reformer and believed education should be the right of all people, especially those who were not well off. For Pestalozzi, the primary purpose of education was to build on students' abilities. Froebel was a German educator, and his thoughts on early childhood education helped shape some of the foundational tenets of early childhood education in the West, particularly the "hands-on" learning approach. Miller (1992) noted that one commonality of these philosophers was their advocacy for characteristics of schooling that emphasized child-focused education, in contrast to education that focused on societal demands.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, other educators, including Ivan Illich (1926 – 2002), A.S. Neill (1883 – 1973), Maria Montessori (1870 – 1952), and Rudolf Steiner (1861 – 1925), were also foundational in the alternative school movement. Illich was a theologian and opponent of mass education. He believed schools needed to be dismantled

17

because they were oppressive. He thought teaching students should be an active process, self-liberating with students' rights to control education and pursue their interests instead of passive learning. Neill was a British educator who supported ideas of self-development. Parental involvement was an essential component under his framework. Montessori, an Italian physician who later became an educator, believed education and learning naturally result from children's interests and activities. Steiner was an Austrian philosopher who examined human development and believed in experiential learning.

Their significant contributions included child-centered and experiential learning and schooling that emphasized social and democratic ideas, both short and long-term. This included understanding stages of human development, defining roles of teachers, students, communities, and governments. In summary, each philosopher was credited with significant contributions to education and society and paved the paths to progressive education forms.

Each philosopher's contribution to education was marked by tremendous influences of economic and private sector interests. Financial and private sector interests primarily reflected another set of ideas and goals that prioritized social efficiency and growth. By the 1980s, the number of students enrolling in school increased, and the high proportion of students leaving (dropping out of) school also increased. The landscape of education has changed dramatically since 1983, with an ever-increasing focus on public education to help meet human capital needs (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2012; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Vadeboncoeur, 2009). The emphasis on human capital has reinforced education ideas as competition instead of education as learning and growth.

In the past few decades, there has been a dual focus on educational choice and educational standards. Much of the choice movement is based on neoliberal ideas of a market economy supporting competition, individual accountability, improvement, and success (McGregor & Mills, 2012; McGregor et al., 2015; Vadeboncoeur & Portes, 2002). Human capital aspirations have constrained early versions of alternative schools, which initially centered on child-focused education.

According to Settles & Orwick (2003), another version of "alternative" school concurrently evolved. Other versions of alternative schools tended to be remedial, focused on improving areas where youth struggled, and often included a behavioral improvement curriculum (Raywid, 1990, 1994). Continuation schools are one prevalent form of this version of alternative schools. A defining feature of continuation schools is the commitment to sending youth back to their conventional home school when they are "back on track" (Kelly, 1993; Rumberger, 2011).

In the 1970s, school districts across the United States began to establish alternative education programs and schools for students considered "at-risk" of school failure or dropping out. One form of continuation school are Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs (DAEPs). DAEPS are designed to serve students who demonstrate behavior that does not align with expectations at their home campus. In contrast to educational and therapeutic alternative settings, DAEPs are aimed at correcting or managing the behavior of disruptive students (Aron and Zweig, 2003; Raywid, 1994). Alternative schools that fall into this category may share similarities with the progressive alternative schools that started in the 1960s and early 1970s. According to Raywid and Wehlage (1994), the 1970s resulted in more schools pursuing a progressive approach to learning responding rapidly to

the social-political functions. From their observations, this led to an increase in open classrooms, less government involvement, and the Vietnam War. Consequently, they suggested the school reform movement was a consequence of flexible standards of learning. The school reform effort, as argued by them, led to enhanced standards and legislation to raise expectations.

For example, Raywid and Wehlage (1994) produced a study that identified characteristics of effective alternative high schools in Iowa. They determined that student retention and graduation completion correlated with experiential-focused education and combining academics with work-related fundamentals (Raywid, 1994). Other factors included cooperative learning, peer tutoring, and student belief in successful completion of the program. Although this study was smaller and conducted some time ago, it highlights some of the progressive aspirations of alternative education.

In contrast, a more recent study focused on the effects of the zero-tolerance policy in Texas revealed record levels of high enrollment among students of Color, with a "revolving door". The focus of zero-tolerance programs is discipline. Often, They are last resort schools, and students most likely do not have support systems for academic growth and completion (Miller, 2010). There are fundamental differences in how the schools approach students and their visions of education and success in education (Rumberger, 2011).

Standardized testing and accountability measures function as a lever for school districts to refer more students to alternative forms of education. In fall 2020, about 15.3 million youth were enrolled in grades 9-12 (United States Department of Education, 2020),

and roughly 500,000 attended alternative schools. Among those attending alternative schools, African American students, Hispanic students, and low-income students are overrepresented. African American students represent about 16% of students nationally but 20% of students in alternative schools. The percentage of overrepresentation is similar for Hispanic and low-income students (U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

In South Carolina, African American students 49% of the students enrolled in high schools and 75 % in alternative schools/programs. Using federal and local data, ProPublica (2017), an independent, nonprofit, found that the number of students in alternative schools grew moderately over the past 15 years, with upticks in enrollment following new national mandates regarding testing and graduation rates. Judging school success from an alternative school is complex. Specifically, variations exist in on-time graduation. It is essential to consider whether rates include youth who graduate in their fifth, sixth, or seventh year.

Often graduation rates do not retain these youth (only using a four-year graduation rate), lowering alternative schools' graduation percentages (Rumberger, 2011). Some alternative schools may not focus on a four-year graduation rate and instead encourage youth to pursue paths and timeframes that fit their needs and interests (Tierney, 2016). Defining graduation rates solely as four-year completion ignores the reality that graduation occurs in alternative schools in ways that metrics fail to reflect. Youth who enter alternative schools may need credits that make a four-year graduation an impossible goal (Tierney, 2016). Current educational policies have affected alternative schools by prioritizing quantitative measures, such as test scores and four-year graduation rates. Often,

other measures of success are ignored. The safety youth feel, the feelings of connection they have with a school, and their successful identification with the school are all pieces that are important to consider but can be more challenging to measure. Academics may become intertwined with youths' personal and social lives as well (Tierney, 2016). It was essential to acknowledge the breadth of these schools' goals and the diverse range of experiences youth have who attended them in alternative school contexts. Also, it was necessary to have a working understanding of alternative schools to assess which version of an alternative school one observes.

In terms of everyday structure, alternative school programs differed from the traditional setting regarding scheduling, administrative structure, environment, and/or curriculum. Typically, these programs included access to counseling and community resources, strategies to gain parental input and support, low student-to-teacher ratios, and a flexible curriculum, which are all believed helped foster improved sense of psychological well-being (Wilson-Murphy, 2007). These programs are designed to motivate disengaged students, often named "at-risk" by others. Although programs vary from school to school, Raywid (1994) is credited with grouping alternative school programs into three types: Type I, II, and III. Table 1 is Types of Alternative Schools Adapted from Raywid (1994) and Wilson-Murphy (2007).

Table 2.1

Types of Alternative Schools adapted from Raywid (1994) and Wilson-Murphy (2007)

Type	Characteristic
Type I	Schools of choice, based on themes with an emphasis on innovative programs or strategies to attract students.
Type II	Last chance schools where students are placed as a last resort before expulsion. This program offers few options for students and parents. Emphasis is usually on behavior modification or remediation and basic skills.
Type III	Schools are designed with a remedial focus on academic issues, social-emotional issues, or both.

Raywid (1994) and Wilson (2007) delineated the categories of alternative schools by their approach to youth; specifically, how much onus (for success, engagement, involvement, etc.) falls on the child and how much onus falls upon schools. As shared earlier, conversations with leadership, community members, and parents suggest the definition of alternative school from the "Type I" category to capture the type of alternative school and learning environment of LCAS. As this study progress, additional clarity might determine otherwise.

For this project, I am interested in the experiences of African American males in an alternative program and how LCAS contributes to students' social, emotional, and academic well-being. Tierney (2016) argued that alternative schools are always an alternative to mainstream schooling, which is part of their power to help youth redefine their identities in school. Alternative education programs are a space for students to pursue and realize different types of success outside of the traditional, identity-limiting education setting (McGregor & Mills; 2012; Tierney, 2016; Vadeboncoer & Portes, 2002).

Zero-tolerance Policies

Studies about school discipline and zero-tolerance policies indicated significant racial disparities in student suspensions and expulsions. Such evidence was supported in findings from *Racial Disparities Related to School Zero Tolerance Policies: Testimony to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights*, a 2000 national study of school discipline and zero-tolerance policies in school districts nationwide. This report indicated student suspensions and expulsions increased due to zero-tolerance policies and had a negative impact on students of Color. This study noted as well "a significant reporting deficiency in disciplinary actions in U.S. school" (Keleher, 2000, p. 138).

Recommendations to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights included eliminating zero-tolerance policies and advocating a more restorative approach when dealing with disciplinary practices. Another study, "*Zero Benefit: Estimating the Effect of Zero Tolerance Discipline Policies on Racial Disparities in School Discipline,*" reported that, specific practices implemented in United States schools over the past eight years (1999-2007) to reduce violence in schools, including zero-tolerance policies and an increase in

School Resource Officers, have created the environment for the criminalization of youth in schools. This resulted from patterns of discipline in schools mirroring law enforcement models (Hoffman, 2014). The nature and historical practices of discipline in public schools should be restorative instead of punitive. Evidence from these studies and others provide data about the overrepresentation of students of Color in disciplinary processes and signal a systemic issue.

Assignments to alternative schools have increased due to the proliferation of zero-tolerance policies at the state, district, and school levels that require administrators to suspend or expel all students who commit certain infractions (Vaught, 2011). The use of zero-tolerance policies rose during the early 1990s in response to school shootings. Since desegregation, the excessive suspension and expulsion of African American males have consistently been a point of concern for over 45 years (Vaught, 2011). Despite the presumed "color-blind" nature of zero-tolerance policies, educators implement them in racialized ways resulting in a discipline gap between White students and students of Color as well as those from low-income backgrounds (Casella 2003; Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera 2010; Howard 2008; Skiba et al. 2002). Casella (2003) explained that the disproportionate representation in discipline processes that African American males experience occurs because "school personnel perceives such individuals as 'not fitting into the norm of the school" (p. 130). As a result of school personnel subjectivity, students of Color tend to make up the majority of suspensions and expulsions, which leads to a higher number of them being enrolled in alternative schools (Kennedy et al., 2017).

Another lever in the school-to-prison pipeline was the growth in private prisons. The rise of harsher sentencing policies, including mandatory minimum sentences, fueled a rapid expansion in the nation's prison population beginning in the 1980s. This period also led to soaring arrest rates that disproportionately targeted communities of Color. According to a 2018 report from Drug Policy Alliance, four decades later, the number of Americans behind bars has grown by 350 percent. By 2017, more than 2.2 million Americans were in prison or jail, and nearly 60 percent were black or Latino (Drug Policy Alliance, 2018). Between 2000 and 2016, the number of people in private prisons facilities increased 47 percent while the overall prison population increased 9 percent. The private prison population peaked at 137,220 in 2012; it then declined to 126,272 in 2015, before rising again in 2016 to 128,063 (Carson, 2018).

Concurrently, more African American and Latinx children are tracked into the juvenile justice system with zero-tolerance policies, benefitting the private prison industry since the 1980s. As the rate of incarceration increased, the need for prisons and institutions increased which led to privatization of prisons and the reaping of financial gains that sustain the school-to-prison pipeline. Kim et al. (2010), book "*The School-to-Prison Pipeline: Structuring Legal Reform*" provided a comprehensive review of the school-to-prison pipeline, detailing the insufficient educational policies and procedures that target under-served populations, i.e., children of color, students with disabilities, undocumented youth, homeless, foster care, and English language learners. In conjunction with inadequate funding for public school resources to assist this population and punitive juvenile justice system, students who need educational and mental health services will most likely receive a criminal record before a high school diploma. The evidence presented

in this book demonstrates discriminatory policies that harshly affect African American males while White males experience far fewer penalties. Additionally, the suspension rate for African American students has doubled over the past 30 years in public schools in the U.S.

The literature presented in the "*Prison Journal volume* 2019, suggests that the reemergence of conservative ideology in policy during the 1980s and emerging ideological frameworks of that era helped establish neoliberal, actuarial models of justice and punishment administration in practice today. The journal suggested reemergence of conservative ideology and emerging ideological frameworks led to the logic of neoliberal justice, criminalization of blackness, and intersectionality of social and institutional systems. This journal's core arguments are: understanding race as a carceral terrain, emphasizing the structural factors and lived realities of those affected, while creatively linking analyses to the urgency of current social and political movements. Lastly, understanding Black Lives' narratives of social and political movements allowed us to capture the core of navigating racial injustice.

Beckett and Murakawa (2012) pointed to other levers, including expanding penal power through institutional annexation and legal hybridity, including increased civil and administrative pathways. They suggested that recognizing expanded carceral capacity is essential to elucidate how the penalty reinforces social and racial inequality. Also, criminal law and criminal justice institutions increasingly represent only the most visible tentacles of penal power. This expansion was more legally hybrid and institutionally variegated than is sometimes recognized. Their analysis showed "how overt get-tough policies and rhetoric are supplemented and extended by the range of seemingly small policy innovations and

complex institutional adaptations, including the creation of civil 'alternatives' to criminal sanctions, coercive efforts to recoup criminal justice expenditures, and heightened immigration enforcement" (p. 19) Their line argument extended beyond incarceration to post-release and states punitive sanctions in the reentry and supervision context. They also emphasized the cycle of post-release and recidivism. If individuals cannot access or easily navigate community institutions (i.e., housing, employment, etc.), they might avoid returning to practices subject to adverse outcomes.

Alternative Schools/Programs

Not many studies have tracked students' transitions back to the regular school environment after finishing their time at the alternative school. However, some studies suggest negative perceptions of students' ability to succeed (Davis 2003; Gurantz 2010*;* Kennedy-Lewis, Whitaker, and Soutullo 2016*).* Other studies have examined academic performance measurements often associated with federal policy and school accountability systems (Glassett, 2018). For example, New York City public schools created a new progress report card specifically for alternative educational schools. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2018) report, the district has more than 50 transfer schools enrolling nearly 15,000 students, a dramatic increase in both number and enrollment over the last 15 years.

Reporting on transfer schools, coined under this initiative and defined initially as schools serving high school students who enroll after having previously been enrolled in another high school, focuses on comparative graduation rates between transfer schools and traditional high schools. The relative graduation rate is lower at transfer schools in

aggregate; however, if students had remained at their traditional high schools, they would be likely to graduate at rates at least 50 percent lower than at their transfer school. "While graduation rates among transfer schools are lower than that of traditional high schools, data suggest that students attending transfer schools would, in the absence of these schools, have graduated at rates at least 50 percent lower than they did (NCES, p. 12)."

A knowledge gap exists in understanding how students experience and are assessed while attending alternative schools (Jimenez et al., 2018). Therefore, I argued that, at minimum, school districts' accountability system implementation should be better designed to reflect student experiences in alternative schools and not just metrics. These critically needed insights can improve investigation into the experience of students in alternative schools.

Push Out and Placement in Alternative Schools/Programs

According to Katsiyannis and Williams (1998), the documentation of entrance and exit patterns for alternative education programs is crucial as it reduces "placements based on administrative convenience or isolation of 'undesirables,' denial of education services, and engagement in haphazard practices that lack planning and adequately trained personnel" (p. 282). In addition, understanding trends in student discipline provides valuable information for those serving on discipline review committees, developing interventions, and attempting to improve the climate and safety of schools. Understanding the reasons students were placed might reduce enrollment and increase success at the home campus.

Psychologists Booker and Mitchell (2011) studied recidivism and discretionary placement patterns in alternative disciplinary education and looked at factors of gender, ethnicity, age, and special education status. Unlike other studies which focus significantly on patterns in the referral and suspension of diverse students in school discipline, this study examined the critical nature of Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs (DAEPs). Disciplinary alternative education is a relatively new form of alternative education. The unit of analysis was the probability of being placed in an alternative setting for disciplinary reasons and returning to their home campus within the same school year. Booker et al. stressed the need to explore the connection between specific pathways of student enrollment and student characteristics of alternative programs. In an ethnically diverse sample (African American, Caucasian, Hispanic) of middle and high school students (n=270), they studied the probability of (a) being placed in a disciplinary alternative education setting for mandatory versus discretionary reasons and (b) returning to a home school within the same year. Participants were compared based on ethnicity, gender, grade level, and special education status. The study included alternative disciplinary programs from both an urban and suburban district in the Southwest and two schools. Participants were adolescents (grades 6-12) (n = 269) and consecutive enrollees to the three disciplinary alternative education schools. For schools A and B, all students in attendance during the data collection were included. For school C, all students who were enrolled were invited to participate. The rate of participation was 78% for school C (43 of 55). Participants were predominately male (72.60%, or n = 196). The ethnicity of the students was predominately African American (52.59%; n = 142), Hispanic (36.30%; n = 98), and White (11%; n = 29). Forty-seven percent of the students were in grades 6-8 and the

remaining 53% attended grades 9-12. Twenty-five percent of the students qualified for special education services (Booker & Mitchell, 2011). Students of Color were far more likely to be sent to alternative education programs than their White peers. They were more likely to return to their home campus in the same year than their White peers.

During the last six weeks of the spring semester in 2005 (schools A and B) and 2006 (school C), researchers collected data from parents and students during alternative school intake. The reasons students were enrolled in DAEP were placed into two categories—mandatory and discretionary. These categories were based on state definitions of the type of offense committed for placement. Any behaviors that did not fall in those categories were coded as discretionary based on administrative decisions. Accordingly, mandatory versus discretionary designation was provided from the district for school C. For schools A and B, specific offenses (i.e., truancy, drugs, gang involvement) were provided from the district.

Researchers separately categorized these offenses as either mandatory or discretionary based on state definitions. After categorization, a Pearson product-moment correlation was run to compare the scores with an inter-rater reliability of 98 percent. For any discrepancies, the two raters discussed until 100% agreement was established. Recidivism was determined by evaluating entrance dates for students at the end of the school year. Any student with more than one entrance data in a single school was labeled as a recidivist.

Data was provided from the schools through the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS). Subsequently, descriptive statistics were calculated to obtain a general profile of the sample. For the overall sample, 80% of students were placed for discretionary reasons. Fifty-three percent were recidivists. Findings from the studies revealed significant ethnic differences among groups for the reason of placement. Compared to White students, Hispanic students were 12 times more likely to be placed in DAEP for discretionary reasons, odds ratio (12.08). $p < .0001$. Compared to Caucasian students, African American students were 2.39 times more likely to be placed in DAEP for discretionary reasons, odds ratio (2.39), $p < .05$. Compared to high school students, middle school students were less likely to be placed for discretionary reasons, odds ratio (0.23), $p < .001$. Special education students, when compared to general education students, were no more likely to be placed in alternative education for discretionary or mandatory reasons. Similarly, there were no significant differences between the likelihood of boys being placed for discretionary reasons than girls.

The second logistic regression also revealed significant ethnic differences among groups regarding recidivism. When compared to White students, "Hispanic students were 4.1 times more likely to be recidivists, odds ratio (4.10), $p < .005$. African American students were 3.37 times more likely to be recidivists, odds ratio (3.37), $p < .005$" (Booker et al., 2011, p. 198). Significant gender differences were also found. Male students were more than twice as likely to return to an alternative school as female students were. There were also differences in students from middle and high schools, with the former being less likely to return than their middle school counterparts. Special education students were no more likely to return than their general education peers. Two significant findings are the

32

higher recidivism rate students of Color experienced, and the higher number of

discretionary reasons school personnel used for alternative placement for students of

Color. Suggestions for future practice and research are needed to determine the

developmental implications of DAEPs. It is clear that there are cultural and developmental

implications of these findings in DAEP placement. They require attention and additional

exploration to determine the underlying causes of the discriminatory impact that African

American and Hispanic students are experiencing.

David Connor's (2006) study highlighted challenges associated with education,

housing, and employment. In the article that centers Michael's story, he shares through

narrative representation how race, labels of disability affected a young African American

male student who was committed to education and his own success. As Connor (2006)

explained,

> the structural domain shows how Michael conceived of himself in terms of his
>
> positionality within three discourses: 1) acceptance of his own disability 2)
>
> acknowledgment that Blacks have far fewer opportunities and choices than Whites
>
> in terms of education, housing and jobs—and the influence this phenomenon exerts
>
> upon self-expectation and the expectations of others; and 3) recognition and
>
> acceptance of being working class, along with a wariness of the middle-class,
>
> balanced by a desire to change his current economic status to become upwardly
>
> mobile. (p. 6)

Michael's story contradicts a generally held and mythical idea of "an even playing field" in

our society (Connor 2006). This story elevated the importance of recognizing the voice of

African American male students labeled with disabilities and Connor advocated for adjusting curriculum and ideas associated with special education.

Brown's (2007) study about students experiencing academic, social, and emotional exclusion in school represented the experiences of 37 students who were suspended or expelled from an urban public, alternative high school. The study, which took place in the northeast of the U.S., drew on survey data and the author's own experiences as a teacher at the school. Brown aimed to demonstrate a relationship between school exclusion and students' academic, social, and emotional well-being. In March 2005, an anonymous questionnaire was administered to 37 students (3 in 9th grade, 18 in 10th grade, 8 in 11th grade, and 8 in 12th grade) who were suspended or expelled from school and attended an urban public, alternative high school. Twenty-eight students identified as Black, two as Latino, and one as White (five did not identify themselves racially or ethnically). Nine respondents identified as female. The survey queries included questions about experiences with suspension, expulsion, and time out of school. They asked participants to reflect on their current and prior schooling experiences, including relationships with teachers, Brown, and other students in the study. Descriptive statistics and correlations were generated from closed-ended data and thematic analysis from open-ended questions. The researcher determined that school exclusion and prolonged absences had a significant effect on academic, social, and affective aspects of students' schooling experiences. The significance of this study is that data was primarily derived from students' reporting.

As in other studies of excluded students (Pippa, 1996; Pomeroy, 2000), Brown (2007) highlighted students' perspectives. The results of these kinds of studies provide a critical understanding of how participants experienced being excluded (Pippa, 1996). One

of the observations in Brown's findings was the loss of classroom instruction. Nearly 75% of the students reported 10 or more suspensions. Ten students had been suspended too many times to recall; 97% said they had been suspended, and 78% reported being expelled at some point in their schooling. Several participants had experienced a prolonged cycle of transitions that created barriers to their school success. The relevant literature emphasized overarching themes relevant to the nature of this research. As mentioned above, punitive outcomes for African American males included but were not limited to being assigned to alternative schools, pushed-out and/or leaving schools. Alternative schools often correlated to structural barriers and higher patterns of referral of students of Color and zero-tolerance policies. Below, I discuss impact of students' experiences in alternative schools/programs.

Student Experiences in Alternative Schools/Programs

In their research about students' experiences returning to comprehensive schools from an involuntary disciplinary alternative school, Kennedy et al. (2012), used a theoretical framework informed by critical race theory to compose counternarratives of middle school students' experiences. Their qualitative study represented counternarratives drawn from the experiences of nine students who had been placed at an alternative disciplinary school and made the transition back to a comprehensive school. While the study did not foreground race in recruitment or data collection, the researchers presumed that a disproportionate number of students of Color would be assigned to alternative schools, which they argued reflected institutional racism and intersectional oppression (Kennedy et al., 2019).

Researchers collected data in Limestone County Unified School in the southeastern United States. This district comprised over 25,000 students, most of whom lived in the county's main city with the remainder living in outlying rural areas. Forty-five percent of students were White; over 35% were Black; around 5% were Latino, and less than 10% were Asian or mixed race. The school district had nearly 50 schools and more than 30 elementary schools, 15 secondary schools, and one alternative school. The single alternative school served all 15 of the secondary schools. Behavioral violations resulted in the removal from a comprehensive school (Kennedy et al., 2019.) Students in grades 6-12 could be assigned to the Phoenix School for two primary causes: a history of disciplinary office referrals or one major offense at the comprehensive school.

Data collection included interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Each student interview lasted between 20 and 45 minutes. Students were asked to reflect on the full range of their experiences at the district's alternative school and their original schools to compare and contrast the experiences. Administrators and teachers also completed 20-60 minute interviews regarding students' transition from the alternative school. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Classroom observations were conducted in at least two of the students' academic classes when possible. They consisted of one 50-min observation per class during which field notes were recorded that reflected students' interactions with teachers and peers. These observations were used as secondary data sources to complement information gleaned during interviews. To analyze the data, the researchers combined narrative and case study approaches. They began by writing case narratives of the transition experiences of the nine participants taking a hermeneutic approach. The researchers followed Josselson's (2011)

narrative analysis method. Josselson believed "that people live and/or understand their lives in storied forms, connecting events in the manner of a plot that has a beginning, middle, and endpoints" (p. 224). According to Kennedy et al., 2017, the examination of educational experiences revealed a dysfunctional relationship between students of Color and the educational discipline system, the role of subjectivity in assigning discipline referrals, and the unintentional marginalization of students of Color.

In her phenomenological case study of the experiences of African American high school students, West (2013) suggested that students who attend alternative schools often feel distant from their teachers and have difficulty relating to them, impacting their ability to engage in the learning process. Her study explored the complexity of social class. West completed in-depth observations and interviews with five African American students between the ages of 16 and 22 who had previously left school and later pursued their high school diplomas at an alternative educational facility. Her phenomenological study utilized a critical qualitative approach. Her unit of analysis was students experiencing academic decline. Through a typological data analysis strategy, West found that each participant expressed the importance of obtaining a traditional high school diploma and regretted not having completed his or her education originally. The two female participants expressed a desire for something better for their children. Students shared a lack of preparation for their desired avocation and expressed a consensus of being left behind by and disconnected from the traditional educational process. West documented students' experiencing a lack of academic stability, feeling disconnected, and needing positive relationships with their teachers.

The National Council of Professors of Educational Administration endorsed a 2014 study emphasizing the importance of establishing positive and fluid relationships with students in the educational process. This phenomenological study of alternative education completers included formal, semi-standardized, open-ended interviews with 12 current or former alternative students who were program completers, eight parents of programs completers, and 10 alternative education staff members. The study focused on two small, rural alternative education programs in southeast Kansas. Researchers explored what successful completers of those alternative education programs were perceived to have influenced their positive outcomes. To understand this phenomenon from the student's perspective, researchers posed the following research questions:

How do instructors and staff members influence successful program completion?

What influence does family involvement play in successful program completion?

How does student self-efficacy impact successful program completion? In what way does small student-to-teacher ratio influence successful program completion?

How does social/emotional support influence successful program completion?

What significance does the design and implementation of individually designed education plans play in successful program completion? (National Council of Professors of Educational Administration, 2014, p.12)

The researchers examined the perceptions of alternative education course completers, parents, and alternative education staff members regarding the elements that contributed to students' successful completion of the programs. Summary of findings revealed caring, and committed teachers were the most important reasons for successful completion. Instilling hope was critical to successful completion, and teachers' relentless promotion of successful program completion was necessary.

Effective alternative education programs must be designed to cultivate positive relationships between teachers and students. Quinn and Poirer (2006) identified several characteristics of alternative programs that effectively met the diverse needs of students who struggled in traditional school settings. The unit of analysis was the characteristics of three alternative programs considered adequate. An additional research aim was to describe those involved in those programs. Data collection included the At Risk Student Services Assessment (ARSSA), which was used to examine if evidence-based practices for at-risk students were implemented well; the Effective School Battery (ESB), which is a survey for teachers and students that captures the psychosocial nature of schools; and the School Archival Records Search (SARS), which was used to access students' academic records.

The study results indicated the importance of several characteristics in creating an effective alternative program: Effective features included the accommodation of learning differences among at-risk students to meet individual student needs. In addition:

Program administrators and staff subscribe to the philosophy that all students can learn.

Programs communicate and support high expectations for all students' positive social, emotional, behavioral, and academic growth.

Program and school administrators are leaders who support the vision and mission of their programs; effectively support staff; listen to teachers, students, and parents; and genuinely care about their students.

Low adult-student ratios in the classroom are considered integral to successful outcomes.

Teachers receive specialized training (e.g., behavior and classroom management, alternative learning styles, communication with families) to support their effectiveness in working with students who do not succeed in traditional educational settings.

Interactions between students and the staff are non-authoritarian in nature. Positive, trusting, and caring relationships exist between staff, and between students and staff.

The opinions and participation of family members in their children's education are

valued, and students' families are treated with respect. (Quinn and Poirer, 2006, p.

11)

This study is significant because its unique design reveals critical characteristics to

consider when identifying and studying successful educational outcomes of alternative

education. While positive effects of alternative education are mostly correlated with

positive relationships and a culture of discovery and learning, specific characteristics and

effectiveness should also be related to graduate completion and student retention.

How effectiveness is defined, and the type of programs being researched in

alternative education programs/schools must be identified when addressing the overall

success and implementation of a program. There is no definition of effectiveness in the

literature, nor is there one kind of alternative program/ school. There is no universal

implementation approach to creating positive outcomes for students who did not perform

well in traditional school settings. Thus, states and districts operate individually, and

students are shuffled between home school and an alternative one. Identifying

characteristics of effective programs lays the groundwork for best practices, reform, and

policy guidelines for individual alternative schools to consider locally.

Buchanan (2013) conducted a case study on an alternative high school and

provided important context to understanding the culture associated with alternative

schooling. She examined educational stakeholders' perceptions of an alternative program

in New England through a descriptive qualitative case study. Her goal was to determine

which practices were most effective with the student population. The unit of analysis was

perceptions of various educational stakeholders regarding the components and practices of the alternative program. The researcher posed two guiding research questions: "How do educational stakeholders perceive the alternative education program affects students' competence, autonomy, and relatedness? How do educational stakeholders perceive the program may be improved to meet the students' specific social, emotional, and academic needs (p. 73)?" The research questions were guided by the three components of Deci & Ryan's (1985, 2000) self-determination theory: developing competence, autonomy, and relatedness to support students' emotional, social, and academic well-being. The participants for this study were selected through a purposeful sample, and sources for data collection were surveys, open-ended interviews, and focus groups. After data collection, Buchanan produced themes and connected them to the literature. Five of the six participants who participated in a focus group interview validated and confirmed the themes and findings that had emerged in the two previous datasets. Results reflected that the program was having a significantly positive effect on students' social, emotional, and academic well-being, including the development of their sense of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Buchanan believed that the students were experiencing a range of about 80 successes, which included social, emotional, and academic. This study also identified suggestions for new practices that could be implemented to continue pursuing improvements in student outcomes and their psychological well-being.

In summary, crafting this project allowed me to investigate the perceptions of African American male students about their experiences at a South Carolina alternative school to determine which practices they perceive to have the most impact when it comes to supporting their path to graduation. Of the articles reviewed, Buchanan's (2013) and

42

Quinn and Poirer's (2006) case studies on alternative high schools contributed most to the methodological design I am pursuing. Their research contributed significantly to the existing literature in the following areas: characteristics of effective alternative education, the inclusion of psychological well-being in data collection, and/or parental involvement in data collection. Whether these elements appear in the perceptions of students at LCAS requires my research project.

As stated by Lange and Sletten (2002), "A series of suspensions, missed classes, disciplinary actions and academic failures leave this group of students weary of the school experience and distrustful that the education system can be a tool for their success" (p. 11). Schools and districts must seek proactive strategies that advance the academic and socioemotional development of and retain and enroll students. Although it may sometimes be necessary to remove a student from school, withholding educational services, intentionally or unintentionally, is antithetical to the goal of "assuring access to equal educational opportunity for every individual" (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Schools and districts should consistently think through academic, social, and emotional effects and long-term implications for students who are excluded from school. It is critical to examine ways to better support students in an alternative placement resulting from suspension or expulsion to keep them connected to education.

Educating African American Students

As mentioned briefly in Chapter 1, often African American male students are navigating more than one pathway in their education. Historically, researchers have suggested that emotional states such as pressure to conform, fear of failure, and low self-

esteem are contributing factors to why African American male students struggle with

excelling in their education (Howard, 2013). According to Howard (2013), other factors

include the absence of an encouraging academic environment and a family structure that

may include transient conditions. Howard (2013) argued that deficit perspectives

negatively affected marginalized students as well. While these factors are critical to

understanding educational outcomes, I would argue that they only provide a limited view

of all those African American male students experience. As Ladson-Billings (2006),

explained, research has centered too often on achievement gaps in primarily short-term

assessment rather than address long-term investments and infrastructure to improve

educational opportunities for students of Color. Research must address sustainable

approaches and the discriminatory impact of disparate investing resources in low-income

kids and communities. In addition, researchers need to continue to listen to African

American males about their experiences in school.

Resources invested within the educational systems of South Carolina from local

and district levels could move the conversations from output (school performance)

framework to input (resources invested) towards educational opportunities. Given the

higher percentages of alternative schools/programs in the southeast (80%), there appear to

be high rates of engagement with disciplinary processes in southeastern schools (Kleiner et

al., 2002). African American males represent the highest number of students in alternative

schools/programs in South Carolina. Nationally, this over-representation extends to special

education placement as well where African American male students face higher rates of

diagnosis in emotional and behavioral categories than their White counterparts, an area of

special education that receives the least amount of funding (Connor & Ferri, 2005). In

addition to enduring low expectations by teachers (Hucks, 2011), at an institutional level, funding appropriations and standardized testing have created punitive consequences for school systems, teachers, and administrators, and many of whom push "low achieving" students out of school. As mentioned by Marsh et al. (2016), pressure to perform well on standardized testing leads officials to suspend or expel students of Color, foster care or homeless students, students with disabilities, and English language learners. As a result of removing them from the testing pool, school officials and districts can enhance rankings and funding.

African American students face a lack of social/emotional support at alarming rates. Most school communities are ill-equipped to address and deliver the trauma-informed care and education that is needed. The inadequate delivery of intervention strategies and resources coupled with the daily violence and traumas Black students experience often results in adverse outcomes over the students' lifespan (Bryan and Boutte, 2021). Curriculum and instruction in schools should offer interventions that increase self-worth and enhance a sense of trust to build successful pathways for achievement and hope alongside culturally relevant and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Dickson et al., 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995a,1995b, 2014; Morrison et al., 2008; Perry, 2003).

In the past, research on schooling and African American males has often used a deficit paradigm rather than a positive, asset-based approach. Incorporating culturally responsive and sustaining practices builds learning capacity while at the same time recognizing rich knowledge, culture, identities African American students have. Culturally responsive and sustaining practices have been connected to increases in academic

achievement as well (Ladson-Billings, 2014). After sketching briefly modern historic context of educating marginalized and African American students, I represent ideas on culturally responsive and sustaining practices and the ways they have been linked to achievement.

Sociologist and historian W.E.B. DuBois argued in his groundbreaking and transformative text, *The Souls of Black Folk*, that the color line still divides us all. This line of argument is still central the ongoing existence of racial hierarchies in the U.S. and continues to have importance in conversations about equitable educational outcomes for all children. Students with disabilities, new English learners, students of Color, and children living in poverty are subjects of structural inequalities associated with schooling. One example can be found in interpretations of gaps in educational achievement as measured by standardized testing.

Literature that pathologizes students of Color for comparatively lower levels of achievement has included theorizing that focused on genes, culture, or a lack of effort and will (e.g., Herrnstein and Murray's, *The Bell Curve*, 1996 and Thernstrom and Thernstrom's, *America in Black and White*, 1998). These deficit frameworks and justifications in social science research position African American students who do not achieve at the same rates as White counterparts as being at fault. The logic of deficit assumptions describing educational experiences surrounding the education of African American students distracts from past and present economic and social conditions. At the same time, it provides few cues as to how to construct comprehensive support systems to address the differences.

Societal efforts to overcome the adverse effects of prejudice and discrimination directed toward African Americans have not been effective enough; inequities continue in almost every aspect of life, including education (Matthew et al., 2016; W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2014). Researchers have found that "the persistence of the educational achievement gap imposes on the United States the economic equivalent of a permanent national recession" (McKinsey et al., 2009, p. 6).

Equity in education almost always returns to the discussion of the achievement gap. The concept was developed after scores on standardized assessments were found to have a wide range of variations based on race and ethnicity. Students of Color tended to score much lower than their White peers. Deficit, discriminatory logics are pervasive in academic and everyday discourse about the achievement gap and generally in educational contexts where the education of African American children is discussed. Perry (2003) described the unique profiles of African American students. Consequently, African American students continue to fare poorly in school (Baugh, 1999; Delpit, 2012; McDermott & Rothenberg, 2000). African American students consistently perform significantly lower on standardized achievement tests, leave school at higher rates, and are disproportionately placed in remedial or special education programs than their White counterparts (Delpit, 2012; Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; McDermott & Rothenberg, 2000).

Although some gains have been made in the achievements of African American students, these increases are sporadic and inconsistent (Grigg, Donahue, & Dixon, 2007). A primary factor in the continued existence of such inequities is a pervasive and rarely examined deficit perspective used to judge children of color in schools (Boutte, 2002a; Milner, 2008b; Volk & Long, 2005).

Ladson-Billings (2006), used as metaphor the national deficit and debt in the U.S., explained debt is "the sum of all previously incurred annual federal deficits" (p. 4). She argued that "the historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral decisions and policies that characterize our society have created an education debt" (p. 5). She likened the achievement gap to the interest payments and described the education debt as the balance of the loan. She documented egregious prohibitions against and absences in education that African American, Native, and Latina/o children endured and the aim of forced assimilation at boarding schools that targeted Native children. Concurrently, she called attention to historic and contemporary disparities in school funding. In 2005 the Education Trust reported that "in 30 states, high minority districts receive[d] less money for each child than low minority districts" (p. 2 as cited in Ladson-Billings, 2006). The achievement gap represents only a small portion of the education debt amassed over a centuries of failing to provide the necessary resources and materials for marginalized children. As a society we will never finish paying it if we continue to focus on the short-term interest. A better educational future for marginalized children depends on acknowledging the education, economic, socio-political, and moral debt and educational researchers addressing inequities from positions that include the axes of this context. Using achievement gap alone is not sufficient and too often the responsibility for closing it has been given to individual children who are marginalized. Ladson-Billings (2006) argued that our focus on the achievement gap has led us to search for "short-term solutions rather than addressing the long-term problem" (p. 4). Ladson-Billings framing of the education debt informs my thinking in this project.

Perry (2010) argued that historically two theoretical models of school achievement of African American students have largely influenced academics who want to explain or predict school performance: the cultural difference and social mobility explanatory models. I have reviewed these two models to identify insights, understandings, and tensions that can inform the context of this project. Research based on the cultural difference model suggests that the variance in outcomes for African American students is likely caused by a misalignment between the students' home and school cultures. More often than not, early research studied language (Perry, 2003). As James Baldwin noted,

> Language is the most vivid and crucial key to identity. It reveals the private and connects one with or divorces one from the larger, public, or communal identity. To open your mouth in England is (if I may use Black English) to put your business in the street. You have confessed your parent, your youth, your school, your salary, your self-esteem, and alas, your future. (1985, 650)

When considered in the context of student achievement, earlier research implied that African American students' culture and language were deficient, leading to their lowered educational outcomes. In the 1970s, testing specialists and teachers eventually began to shift away from the study of language, and researchers discovered that Black language was not a contributing factor in the comparatively lower achievement of African American students. This meant that language assessments had to be updated to decouple Black language from assessments of language deficits or disabilities. Additionally, teachers had to be trained to distinguish between language disabilities and language differences. The focus on Black language began to center on how it showed up in the classroom (Perry, 2003).

49

The changing views around cultural language led to significant discussions around cultural conflict. According to Perry (2003), cultural conflict is the tension between the language used at home and the language expectations of teachers in the classroom. In the discussions of cultural conflict, culturally responsive pedagogy came to the forefront. Culturally responsive pedagogy requires that students be taught with knowledge of and sensitivity to their cultural norms, including how they speak. These conversations eventually led to the development of cultural difference theory which was used to explain the variance in outcomes for African American students.

Cultural difference theory is based on the premise that students raised in different cultural settings may approach education and learn in different ways. Yet, critics (Ogbu, 1983) challenged the theory's ability to explain the variance in student outcomes. Another commonly cited framework, social mobility, refers to the ways that people experience improved changes in their socioeconomic statuses over time. Children who grow up to exceed their parents' social status do so through a combination of factors including education, health, social and cultural capital, and their participation in the labor market (Nunn et al., 2007).

Perry (2010) argued that efforts must be focused on eliminating the long-standing achievement inequity and suggested two components, membership in a community of practice that normalizes achievement and a web of supports scaffolding achievement, are necessary to promote African American student success. Perry's (2003) book entitled *Young Gifted and Black: Promoting High Achievement Among African-American Students* examined experiences from multiple "narratives" of lives of African American achievers through history. She demonstrated how social mobility and social group identity were

negatively influenced after the end of legal segregation. Moreover, she examined African American youth and their progress in social environments and institutions, more specifically school, and discussed disparities associated with resolving risk factors that prevent them from being successful.

Culturally responsive pedagogy and culturally sustaining pedagogies are frameworks that have been critical in discussions about educational opportunities for marginalized children. Developed in early 1990s, culturally relevant teaching centers students' culture in teaching practice through three primary approaches: high expectations, promoting cultural competence, and promoting critical consciousness (Dickson et al., 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Morrison et al., 2008).

In 2014, Ladson-Billings added to her culturally relevant pedagogy framework by building on Paris's (2012) theory of culturally sustaining pedagogy. Paris' culturally sustaining pedagogy is an approach that takes into account the many ways learners' identity and culture evolve. Ladson-Billings (2014) emphasized the idea that pedagogy should consistently evolve to meet students' needs. In her words, "any scholar who believes that she has arrived and the work is finished does not understand the nature and meaning of scholarship" (p. 82). She explained that her framework pushes researchers as well to consider global identities, and developments in arts, literature, music, athletics, and film, instead of focusing solely on ethnic and racial groups.

In their examination of culturally responsive pedagogy, Harris et al. (2018) studied teachers' perceptions of the use of CRP in their science classrooms. Data was collected from K-12 teachers in 18 states through the use of an online questionnaire. The researchers

51

found that 86.4% of teachers had positive perceptions of CRP use in their classrooms. The remaining teachers did not have positive perceptions of CRP use. Other researchers have found that teachers have incorporated student-centered learning strategies to teach and students' culture has been infused into instruction (Cavanaugh, 1997; Tanase, 2020). Tanase (2020) and Cavanaugh (1997) participants were students of Color. Their studies supported creating culturally responsive environments to aid in designing activities that build upon student-centered approaches and cultural competencies.

Cruz et al. (2019) conducted a descriptive study on culturally relevant teaching and found that it positively impacted student learning. Their participants were student of Color. Findings demonstrated that teachers' implementation of culturally relevant teaching increased with their years of experience in the field. As such, it is worth investigating how culturally relevant teaching and positive relationship building with students can influence their academic achievement.

O'Leary et. al., (2020) studied the reported effects of Inclusive Education Workshops with STEM faculty. Data collection lasted three years and O'Leary et. al, used surveys with open-ended and closed-ended items distributed pre-workshops and post-workshops to assess what was learned and if inclusion strategies had been implemented. The overall sample size was 115 participants (109 faculty and six staff members) with a response rate of 95.6%; the follow-up survey response rate was 68.7%. The researchers found that participation in the workshop did lead to enhanced awareness of inclusion strategies and barriers to implementation. O'Leary et al. (2020) reported that "infusing multicultural perspectives classroom met specific goals and expand awareness among faculty about social identities, increase their knowledge of barriers to learning, improve faculty attitudes about students, and inspire faculty to adopt teaching strategies that support equitable and inclusive learning environments" (p. 11).

Discussions and research about the achievement of marginalized children and African American children in particular must include historic context of our education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006) and teaching strategies that are inclusive of student culture and experiences (Dickson et al., 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995a,1995b, 2014; Morrison et al., 2008; Perry, 2003).

If we believe that individuals are the sum of all of their parts, it is imperative that schools address the different "parts" of African American youth that affect and promote achievement. It takes culturally relevant training for educators to address their own cultural biases and also reform to the content of the curriculum to make these youth feel more valued and invested. Our focus needs to attend to how we can be more intentional about the success of African American youth. We must construct systems of achievement that

address the holistic needs of these youth and derail them from negative self-fulling prophecies. Both CRP and CSP are critical ways to promote student-centered approaches and cultural competencies. I hope to learn how, and if these approaches are implemented in LCAS. One of my research questions about pedagogy ask about the importance of instructors. My intent is to understand how students articulate what is occurring in the classroom and if strategies and/or perceptions are CRP/CSP forward.

African American Males Educational Experiences and Counterstorytelling

To fully understand the educational experiences of African American males in LCAS, it is imperative to select a methodological framework to appropriately capture the underlying the often complex dynamics of African American male interactions with their educational environment and the long-term effects of those interactions (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Smith, 2010). One of the more popular methodologies of Critical Race Theory is counterstorytelling. Counterstorytelling has been used in research with marginalized students, including research that has addressed the education of African American males (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001). Solórzano and Yosso (2002) defined counternarratives as "a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society)" (p. 32) Counternarratives challenge and often delegitimate majoritarian stories by amplifying voices that critique oppressive, dominant discourses.

According to Solórzano and Yosso (2002), a majoritarian narrative benefits and privileges Whites, men, individuals of the middle and upper class, and heterosexuals as each identity is linked to a social location of dominance. Majoritarian stories oppress,

54

silence, and attempt to erase experiences and perspectives of marginalized populations, including African American students, particularly those who have been pushed out of school or left school. Delgado (1999) referred to counterstorytelling as a tool for analyzing and challenging those in power whose story is told as a natural part of the dominant discourse. Counterstorytelling is a method of telling and representing stories of individuals whose experiences have not been revealed.

A significant gap in the research on alternative schools/programs is the absence of student voices (Halliday et al., 2019). In South Carolina, the majority of students attending alternative schools/programs are Students of Color. Little is known about the way they experience their education, including how they experience race and racism. We need to hear their perspectives. The value of experiential knowledge may offer significant opportunities for new research paradigms, particularly those centered on race and racism (Howard, 2013). According to Tillman (2002), "interpretive paradigms offer greater possibilities for the use of alternative frameworks, co-constructions of multiple realities and experiences, and knowledge that can lead to improved educational opportunities for African Americans" (p. 5). This project is one contribution to improving educational opportunities for African American male students.

Few studies have used CRT or comparable theoretical frameworks to examine how African American males interpret their educational experiences in alternative school spaces. Duncan and Jackson (2004) used a post-critical approach to look at the schooling inequities of African American males at a Midwest high school. Their research sought to "privilege the voice of those who bear the brunt of inequities in schools and grant them the opportunity to inform the analytic and conceptual categories we bring to our research" (p.

55

3). Duncan et al. used an approach that went beyond traditional critical analysis and centered the voices of young Black males and their schooling accounts. The study highlighted the political nature of language in schools and how African American males made sense of education in an environment that many felt was inherently unjust.

Although not in an alternative school space, DeCuir and Dixson (2004) provided another example of counterstorytelling in their research about the racial climate at Wells Academy, a private school located in a predominately White, affluent southeastern city. Using a counterstorytelling approach, they highlighted persistent and subtle acts of racism between White teachers and students of Color. They elaborated on the implicit and explicit acceptance of racism by school teachers and administrators.

Howard's (2013) study of 200 African American middle and high school males were created from survey data. The researcher asked African American male students about their schooling experiences and the potential roles that race might play in their experiences. A subsample of this larger group consisted of 10 African American males who were middle or high school students during the 2005-2006 academic year. Howard represented counterstories from five different schools in a large metropolitan area on the west coast of the United States. Among the participants, five of the students attended schools in urban, primarily low-income areas made up mainly of African American and Latino students, and the other five participants attended more racially mixed schools located in suburban communities, predominately White and middle-class. Howard's data indicated that the students were keenly aware of the negative stereotypes about African American men. A central theme was the students' explicit attempts not to reinforce widely held beliefs and stereotypes about young Black males. Several participants talked about the

perceptions of young Black males in schools and how they tried to disrupt those beliefs. Most of the participants believed race was frequently a factor in how their teachers and school administrators dealt with them.

Howard's (2013) study examined the salience of racism and negative stereotypes about African Americans and their schooling experiences. The participants' work to disrupt racist stereotypes is an example of countering the majoritarian narrative of racist stereotypes. In the data I collected, I identified racist stereotyping, and deficit perspectives as examples of majoritarian narratives. The counter positions the African American male students at LCAS took up worked against what some others thought of them and where they went to school.

Concluding Thoughts

Over the last century in the U.S., alternative schools have shifted in focus from student-centered approaches to focus on a public education that meets human capital needs. Criteria of and definitions of alternative programs/schools vary, as do the requirements and definitions of success. The success of traditional schools is measured primarily in four-year graduation timelines. Comparatively, such a timeline for alternative schools does not account for a population of students on non-traditional graduation timelines.

Students of Color represent the highest number of students attending alternative schools/programs. A closer examination is needed of the interactions African American males experience in these educational contexts/spaces. Research with African American male students will assist schools leaders and teachers in thinking about why and how youth

57

disconnect and reconnect to educational spaces. Analysis from students' perspectives will

allow educational leaders to see ways to aid them toward success. African American males

have a keen awareness of how race and racism manifest themselves (Howard, 2013), and

counterstorytelling (Delgado, 1989) is a productive methodology for capturing critiques of

majoritarian stories told and reproduced by those in power and for challenging deficit

perspectives about marginalized students.

CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

I have been socially active all my adult life, intervening mostly as a mentor into the lives of students, and especially "black boys", whom some literature describes as "at risk". These relationships developed as result of my outreach efforts. I was once such a person, so I know firsthand the enormous power that effective and caring educators can wield in a life. I do not see much distinction between the classroom and the outside world. Both cultivated a unique context of my existence as an African American male growing up in rural South Carolina, particularly, my experiences with expulsion, incarceration, and alternative education. These experiences, and my perceptions of them were complex and nuanced. My experiences support my desire to devote my dissertation to the topic of understanding African American students' perspectives on the path from alternative schools to graduation. I have chosen a focus and set of research questions that examines the role of school contexts and social labels (Allport, 1954; Devine, 1989). As addressed in Chapter 2, I refer to social labels mostly from the field of psychology where they are used as descriptive classifications to define an individual's behavior or self-identity. In particular, Crossman (2014) addressed the ways stigma is ingrained within multiple aspects of society and the ways implicit forms of prejudice can operate outside people's awareness and shape their behavior toward those who are stigmatized in unintended ways.

Alternative schools and alternative education often are tied to conventional education and normative definitions of school (Raywid, 1994). It is my intent to understand how students might experience Learning Center Achievement School (LCAS) as a space that shares similarities to conventional education and normative definitions of school and as a space that contrasts such norms and reflects progressive commitments in their approach to students and their visions of education and success in education. The terms alternative school and alternative program, are used interchangeably throughout this study. In this chapter I discuss my theoretical frame, my methodology, and positionality, including my onto-epistemology.

Narrative as Counterstorytelling

As shared in Chapters 1 and 2, as an African American, it is imperative to understand my voice in the context of the postcolonial landscape of what became the United States as I seek to understand the voices of African American male participants in the research process. Inviting the narratives of participants is one way to speak back to the racial and racist histories of the U.S. and to center participant voices (Solórzano and Yosso (2002).

Researchers Solórzano and Yosso (2002) defined counternarratives as "a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e. those on the margins of society)" (p. 32). Counternarratives de-center majoritarian stories by centering the voices that challenge the presumptions made by dominant discourses (Solórzano and Yosso 2002), including safety (Howard, 2008). A majoritarian narrative is one that privileges Whites, men, the middle and/or upper class, and heterosexuals by naming these social locations as natural or normative points of reference (Howard 2008; Solórzano and Yosso 2002). Majoritarian stories tend to silence the experiences, explanations, and voices of protest of African Americans and other marginalized populations. Majoritarian narratives silence also African American student experience, especially those who have been pushed out of school. Constructing, telling, and representing counternarratives is a critical race methodology (Solórzano and Yosso 2002; Solórzano, D., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. 2001). Inviting and representing counter narratives holds the potential for community building, too (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002). I plan to use protocol coding (detailed below) to code and analyze for counter points and counter stories to majoritarian logics.

I need to acknowledge that as the researcher I bring a construction of reality to the research situation, which interacts with other people's constructions of interpretations of the phenomenon being studied. The final product of this study will be "yet another interpretation by the researcher of others' views filtered through his or her own" (Merriam, 1998, p. 22).

Luttrell (2010) described qualitative research as "defined by an effort to highlight the meanings people make and the actions they take, and to offer interpretations for how and why." She contends that research design is interactive, not only between researchers and subjects but also between the written documents or findings and the process of engaging in data collection and analysis. Merriam (1998) and Luttrell (2010) reflected ways that constructivist ideas are present in the practice of qualitative research. In addition, as I am interpreting I hold explicit critical commitments to emancipatory possibilities in my reality, and particularly for participants as I seek to understand their experiences. My critical commitments mean that I must address my positionality and critically reflect on my own experiences with alternative school.

Case Study

My investment in this topic, and my search for a research methodology led me to develop interest in case study method. Through this method, I engaged with an epistemological orientation that is critical in nature and analyzed data from a position that where I sought to disrupt dominant, majoritarian narratives that use deficit perspectives to target youth tracked to alternative schools (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002). U.S. social scientist, Robert Yin, known for his work on case study research as well as on qualitative research has been one of the leading scholars in case study. Yin (2014) defined a case as "a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between a phenomenon and context are not clear and the researcher has little control over the phenomenon and context" (p. 13). In other words, case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates the case or cases by addressing the "how" or "why" questions

concerning the phenomenon of interest. This research project meets the general criteria of case study methodology as it poses "how" questions, and the study is focused on a contemporary phenomenon within real life context (Yin, 2009, p. 2). According to Yin, "case study draws from manifold lines of evidence for triangulating purposes" and avails itself of "prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis" (pp.13-14).

Yin's (2014) perspective of case study research design is comprised of five components: a study's questions; its propositions, if any; its unit(s) of analysis; the logic linking the data to the propositions; and the criteria for interpreting the findings. The researcher aims are to make sure that these components are cohesive to and consistent among each other. Yin also suggests addressing the quality of the design against the criteria of the constructs of validity and reliability. Below, I address trustworthiness.

Preparation of a detailed design at the outset of the research is important, and Yin (2014) advised when needed that researchers make minor changes in the design after they begin data collection, keeping detailed notes of any changes in an audit trail. Researchers use a combination of different data sources in case study, including: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observations, participant observation and physical artifacts, each of which has its own strengths and weaknesses. Below, I detail my data sources.

Applying Yin's (2014) case study approach with a counterstorytelling orientation to my research project opened a space to investigate perceptions of alternative school experiences from African American male students, who so often are positioned through prejudices of race and gender that pervade school systems in the U.S. The project was designed for a research and conceptual agenda that complicates and disrupts common majoritarian narratives in education of African American students, particularly African American male students. The purpose is not to perpetuate definitions or labels of "at risk" or inferiority but to fairly understand the youth and the context of Learning Center Achievement School.

In my experience, alternative education programs too often become a dumping ground that use majoritarian logics. Educators often justify exclusionary discipline practices by subscribing to a 'discourse of safety' (Kennedy-Lewis 2014, p. 170), despite the disproportionately negative impacts of exclusionary discipline practices on students of Color. Broadly, the discourse of safety has dominated U.S.' national rhetoric since the 1980s War on Drugs and "asserts the need to keep schools 'safe' by prioritizing the needs of the group over the needs of individuals; asserts that students' behavior results from conscious, well-informed choices; and advocates for punishments severe enough to deter potential perpetrators" (Kennedy-Lewis 2014, p. 170). The discourse of safety supports the use of zero tolerance policies, which have been promoted as a way to eliminate racial biases in disciplinary consequences but have instead continued to disproportionate rates of exclusion from schools for students of Color (Skiba et al. 2011).

These racial disproportionalities resulting from "color-blind" policies should motivate educators to re-evaluate the effectiveness of school discipline practices (Lewis and Diamond 2015). However, educators persist in punishing students of Color more frequently and harshly when compared to their White peers, demonstrating the dehumanization and adultification of African American young people (Goff et al. 2014).

As Delgado Bernal (2002) stated, traditionally, the

> majority of Euro-Americans adhere to a Eurocentric perspective founded on covert and overt assumptions regarding White superiority, territorial expansion, and "American" democratic ideals such as meritocracy, objectivity, and individuality. What this means is that their way of knowing and understanding the world around them is very naturally and subconsciously interpreted through these beliefs. (p. 111)

These beliefs are at play in majoritarian narratives (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002). Some of the reasons that African Americans experience disparities in school are negative social labeling, disengagement, and marginalization (Wallace, et. al., 2012), I believe the literature has oversimplified and neglected complexities of student experiences in alternative school spaces and on the path to graduation. I believe there is a significant amount that can be learned from youth in alternative school spaces. And, indeed there was.

Establishing boundaries in case study can prevent researchers from attempting to answer questions that are too broad or a topic that has too many objectives for one study. Yin (2003) and Stake (1995) have suggested that placing boundaries on a case can

prevent this explosion from occurring. One might bound a case by place, time, activity, and or context. Alternative school (place) experiences of African American males on paths to graduation (activity) are two ways I bound this research in the broader area of research on African American student experiences with school.

Yin (2003) categorized case studies as explanatory, exploratory, or descriptive. An explanatory case study is used when a researcher wants to represent explanations of real-life interventions that are too complex for survey or experimental strategies. A descriptive case study is a type of case study that is used to describe an intervention or phenomenon and the real-life context in which it occurred. An exploratory case study is used to explore contexts in which the phenomena or intervention being evaluated has no clear, single set of outcomes. Yin (2014) also differentiates between single, holistic case studies, and multiple case studies. Yin (2002) described three types of case study design that researchers can use. They include single case, holistic case, and multiple case design. A single case is a case where the researcher only wants to study single person or a single thing (for example a person from a specific group) or a single group (for example, one group of people). A holistic case is a case where the case is the unit of analysis – the phenomena the researcher is studying. In contrast, a multiple case study design is one where multiple cases are used to understand similarities and differences between or among the cases.

In this research, I chose a descriptive, single case study design. I was interested in African American male student perspectives about their experiences on paths to graduation in alternative schools. I wanted to understand the specific uniqueness of their

experiences in a particular interactive context and a case study design is well suited for these aims (Merriam & Associates, 2002, p. 5). I explored the experiences of students completing an alternative school while specifically gaining their perceptions of the approaches that are aiding/aided them to successfully graduate. Given my commitments to emancipatory work and the coding and analyzing I did in search of counter points and counter narratives to majoritarian narratives, this research study is both critical and etic.

In educational research, an emic perspective typically means approaches and representations that center the internal language and meanings of a defined culture from the perspective of the participants (Merriam, 2009). Regardless of how a culture's scope is defined, "an emic perspective attempts to capture participants' indigenous meanings of real-world events" (Yin, 2010, p. 11) "and looks at things through the eyes of members of the culture being studied" (Willis, 2007, p. 100). In contrast, the etic perspective encompasses an external view on a culture, language, meaning associations and real-world events. Most often, in social behavior research, the etic perspective is associated with that of the researcher because it comprises the structures and criteria developed outside the culture as a framework for studying the culture" (Willis, 2007, p. 100). Hence, researchers typically use this approach in their study to examine preexisting theories, hypotheses, and perspectives as constructs to see if they apply to an alternative setting or culture. My research project was a critical, descriptive, single case study that centered the voices of African American male students and represented the counter points and counter narratives they shared (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002) on their path from alternative school to graduation. Using Saldaña's (2009) protocol coding, I coded for counter points and counter narratives. Protocol coding can be used anytime a researcher

67

has an idea that drives their analysis from the outset. In this project, I coded for counter points and counter narratives as a part of the design. In addition, I used open coding in an inductive round of coding to note salient topics and issues the students addressed. The themes represented in Chapter 4 reflect both protocol and open coding.

I expected to learn a great deal from the participants about their experiences and the meanings they have attached to them, and I did. Given the absence of student perspectives of alternative school experiences in the literature, centering the perceptions and stories of African American male students who have been pushed out of their home schools is important. As much as possible I tried to center student voice and convey each individuals' stories through their own words. In doing so, my hope is that the reader will be drawn into the interpretive process and invited to make meaning "based on an interpretation of the text as it is viewed through their own realities" (Cole 2001, p. 3). In other words, what is learned comes not only from the participants' telling of their story but also from reader interaction with those tellings.

Unit of Analysis

It is imperative to understand stories of youth experiences with alternative schooling. As argued by Lincoln, et al. (1994), "voice" is a multilayered problem. Legitimacy becomes interwoven in contextual representation of the researcher, nature of the project, and participants. I aimed to center student voice and hope to challenge the majoritarian logics of alternative school spaces as dumping grounds and provide much needed understanding of African American youth experiences on the path to graduation.

The selection of the unit of analysis is one of the first steps in the qualitative research. The "unit of analysis", according to Yin (2014), refers to the portion of content that will be the basis for decisions made and reduce the confusion and ambiguity in defining the case. For example, in textual content analyses, the unit of analysis may be at the level of a word, a sentence (Milne & Adler, 1999), a paragraph, an article or chapter, an entire edition or volume, a complete response to an interview question, entire diaries from research participants, or some other level of text. My unit of analysis is African American male student experiences on the path to graduation at an alternative school.

Because students' perspectives can have external influences such as characteristics of schools' structures, practices, significant persons, and resources, I sought to understand broadly what is working and how in their lives as they moved toward graduation. Additionally, I wanted to work against deficit perspectives in the literature (Baker, 2019) and address how alternative schools and youth attending them are viewed. Lastly, I did not want to overlook that many youth attending this alternative program could be there as a result of previous struggles and so wanted to keep my tentative interview questions open and contextual while also aligning them to my research questions.

My study design aligns with Yin's (2009) description of case study that acknowledges multiple areas of interest and multiple sources of evidence based on prior theoretical propositions. My research questions were developed with this unit of analysis in mind as well as the school's needs given the access they were providing.

Research Questions

The research questions were designed with the intent to move beyond familiar, majoritarian deficit approaches to African Americans students and instead focus on identifying experiences that lead to academic success in the alternative school environment as LCAS.

1. How do African American male students describe their perspectives on their placement?

2. How do African American male students describe their path to graduation, including defining moments?

3. What and who do African American male students identify as important in order to be successful in the alternative school?

   a. What resources do students identify as important?

   b. How are instructors identified as important?

   c. How are staff identified as important?

   d. Other people (parents/guardians; peers; friends)? other forms of support/resources identified as important?

Setting

The mission of the Learning Center Achievement School is to help students graduate and develop academic, social, emotional, career and life skills that will lead to productive citizenship. The school offers a flexible learning environment for 11th and

12th grade students who may have circumstances that interfere with their academic progress in a traditional setting. The school has 1 Director and 5 teachers and 2 support staff members. Currently, there are 20 students enrolled. A flexible learning environment means that students use a digital curriculum platform in addition to in person learning in the classroom. The digital platform provides a personalized and flexible option for students. Courses can be used for initial credit or credit recovery as well as content or concept recovery in order to ensure subject-area mastery. Teachers monitor student progress, offer one-on-one assistance both virtual and in person, and proctor assessments when necessary.

The age of students ranges from 17-years-old to 20-years-old. The students have been designated with a "dropout" status or given a referral from their home/host school principal, professional school counselor, or hearing officer. Enrollment criteria is based on a student's current status and documented as "No Show". The term "No Show "is a student who is enrolled in the school but has never attended classes during any given academic school year. The student must have at least 12 credits on their current transcript. Students work toward a South Carolina High School Diploma, and if required, take SC End-of-Course exams at their home/host school. School hours of operation are Monday- Thursday from 4:30 pm to 6:30 pm. The student must provide his/her own transportation arrangements. Of the 20 schools in the district, LCAS is the only 1 of 3 classified as alternative high school /program (OCSD, 2021).

Information pulled from county's website revealed "racial make-up of largely African American (70%) compared to 23% of White. With an average poverty rate of

27% with roughly 12,800 residents as of current census information. The town is considered a college town with almost 30% of adults 25 and older have at least a bachelor's degree. In terms of income per capita, approximately $18,000 which is considered lower middle income relative to South Carolina, and low income relative to the rest of the United States. Lastly, as indicated by crime statistics ranked on a scale of 1 (low crime) to 100 (high crime), violent crime rate is 39 (U.S. average is 22.7) and 83.9 with (U.S. average rate is 35.5)" (Citation was not included for purposes of confidentiality.).

Data Sources, Coding, and Analysis

Participants

The participants included four African American males. They were a group of three current students and one student who recently matriculated. The three students at LCAS were in their last year of school before graduation. The fourth participant had recently completed enough credits for graduation. In Chapter 4, I provide additional descriptive information about participants.

In-depth interviews. In order to answer the research questions of this study, I conducted individual in-depth interviews with the students who volunteered to participate. Each participant completed both an individual interview and participated in a focus group. Each interview lasted approximately 60-75 minutes. Interviews were held at a time and place convenient for participants, recorded after informed consent forms were shared and signed, and transcribed after the interviews. The focus group lasted approximately 90 minutes.

According to Yin (2009), one of the most important sources of case study information is the interview. This data source was chosen because open-ended questions allow the researcher to listen to the participants and let their answers guide new questions (Glesne, 2016), and my interest here was in centering the voices of the students and analyzing for counter points and counter narratives. p. 116). The first interview focused on the interview protocol (see Appendix A). The second interview provided an opportunity for follow up, clarification, and member checking. Member checking is the practice of returning data or results to participants to check for accuracy and resonance with the participant's experiences. Member checking assists in establishing credibility through the claim of accuracy of one's data (Glesne, 2016).

Throughout the research process, I member checked with students for clarity. I discussed data interpretations, general understandings, and eventually, themes with them to check for accuracy and to confirm if interpretations resonated with their experiences. In the interview stages, this process happened as a result of valuing their opinions and inviting equal collaboration. I was careful to remember to work against unintentionally creating a power struggle. In other words, I established eye contact, repeated back to students verbatim their interpretations and experiences, and confirmed with them my interpretations accurately represented their experiences. They had the final "sign off" before any draft was published. During the focus group, the process of member checking seemed more fluid. After students addressed a topic, I would repeat and summarize what I had heard. In the art-based activity a form of member checking happened through the activity itself. They described experiences separately and for clarity, I confirmed with

each of them the interpretations I had of those experiences. Lastly, I shared chapters 4 and 5 with students.

Admittedly, I was nervous as a result of not knowing how they would be react even after the multiple member checking processes. They could have easily not agreed with any or all of the content in both chapters. Fortunately, they gave me the go ahead. This led me to reflecting on a future project with them which could serve as a longitudinal study. I believe our rapport would support such a research endeavor.

Focus group. I conducted one focus group (see Appendix B) with 4-5 participants. Because a group, rather than an individual, is asked to respond to questions in a focus group, dialogue tends to take on a life of its own. Participants "piggy-back" on the comments of others and add richness to the dialogue that could not be achieved through a one-on-one interview (Kruegar & Casey, 2000, p.1). The focus group allowed for critical dialogue. It was the first time students are meeting virtually. They attended majority of the same classes at LCAS and shared personal and professional experiences with each other.

The main aim of the focus group, as Rubin and Rubin (1995) explain, is to "let people spark off one another, suggesting dimensions and nuances of the original problem that any one individual might not have thought of. Sometimes a totally different understanding of a problem emerges from the group discussion" (p. 140).

As discussed in Berg (2012), there are various advantages and disadvantages to a focus group. Advantages to a focus group interview are:

1. It is highly flexible (in terms of number of participants, groups, costs, duration, etc.).

2. It permits the gathering of a large amount of information from potentially large groups of people in relatively short periods of time.

3. It can generate important insights into topics that previously were not well understood.

4. It allows the researchers to better understand how members of a groups arrive at, or alter, their conclusions about some topic or issue and provide access to interactionary clues.

5. It can be used to gather information from transient populations.

6. It places participants on a more even footing with each other and the investigator.

7. The moderator can explore related but unanticipated topics as they arise in the course of group's discussion,

8. Focus groups do not require complex sampling strategies.

According to Berg (2012), potential disadvantages are:

1. The quality of the data is deeply influenced by the skills of the facilitator to motivate and moderate.

2. Focus group lend themselves to a different kind of analysis than might be carried out with surveys or even individual interviews.

3. Focus group attendance is voluntary, and an insufficient number may attend a given planned session.

4. The length (duration) of each focus group needs to be fairly brief (ideally between 30 to 60 minutes, although longer focus groups do occur).

5. A limited number of questions can be used during the course of any focus group session.

6. Only group, not individual, opinions are obtained in the results.

Understanding the advantages and disadvantages on focus groups are important. While each offer important considerations in planning, the advantages I see in this particular project are: gaining important insights into the students' everyday experiences on the path to graduation and enhancing understanding of how participants arrive at, or alter, their ideas about education, alternative schools, and graduation. One disadvantage to the research project could be the length of time of the focus group. As stated above, the duration of most focus groups should be brief, although longer focus groups do occur. Also, student participants may or may not be inclined to share important information and/or may be influenced by group think. I found that it required encouragement and listening on my part to help gain their trust to get to the "heart" of their experiences.

Each participant was asked to sign a consent form that explained the purpose and procedures of the study, which included a written statement explaining that participation is solely voluntary. I conducted a focus group first with participants, with the intent of going deeper with each individual in individual interviews based on things the group discussed from the focus group.

Classroom observations

Originally, I had planned for classroom observations of participants as a data source toward triangulation. Approximately 7 hours per student of classroom observation was planned (a day of school for each). Unfortunately, due to increased cases of the Omicron variant of Covid-19 in the winter of 2021-2022, LCAS moved classes online. With teacher-student dynamics altered in essential ways, I chose to build more time around the art-based project I hoped the students would be willing to complete. The students were interested in the project, and below the process is detailed. Both interviews and focus groups went well. I believe this resulted not only from the nature of the research but also the openness we created throughout the research project. Experiences served as bonding moments.

Art-based Data Source

Another data source I collected was an art-based source. The term art-based research is an umbrella term that covers an eclectic array of methodological and epistemological approaches grounded in art. The key elements that unify this diverse body of work are: it is research with one or more art forms or processes involved in the doing of the research. How art is involved varies enormously. It has been used as one of several tools to elicit information (Cremin, Mason, & Busher, 2011; Gauntlett, 2007; Wang & Burns, 1997) and for the analysis of data (Boal, 1979; Gallagher, 2014; Neilson, 2008). It serves as research itself in some projects and as an enrichment to other methods used in other research.

The purpose of this approach in this project was to elicit participants' to engagement on deeper levels. I implemented the art-based approach during the focus group with a prompt about their identities. I was interested in the ways participants might create a poem. I introduced the poem, "I am From" by George Ella Lyon and asked students to then draft a poem when they had time during the week that followed. I asked them to think about their own identity and to respond in the same format Lyon used. The activity allowed participants to create a unique poem (see Chapter 4 for each poem). I think the art-based activity provided an additional layer to my learning about their identities and experiences and their concepts of community.

I chose Lyon's poem because it encouraged me to reflect more on some defining moments of my own journey, and I wanted an activity where students felt latitude and creativity to share their own past experiences. As the researcher, I did consider potential constraints to implementing the activity with the poem as example. However, this particular poem I felt had flexible parameters and added an additional context to the research. I think consideration of students' perception of this activity was utmost priority. Later, I discuss the activity and how the students responded when I checked in with them to see if they wanted to move forward with it.

In terms of process, the students created their own responses and shared them with me virtually about a week after the focus group. I believe the activity created rapport and generated another dimension of meaning making. We discussed each of our experiences collectively. As I reflected on the significance of art, I was hopeful about the potential it has to engage with voice and represent voice in art form for the students. I

78

found that the students were engaged with the activity and readily shared their poem with me.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

The Research Council (2003) indicates care in research usually involves

- gaining inform consent from all persons who may be part of the case study, by alerting them to the nature of the study;

- protecting those who participates in the study from any harm, including avoiding the use of any deception in your study;

- protecting the privacy and confidentiality of those who participate so that, as a result of their participation, they will not be unwittingly put in any undesirable position;

- taking special precautions that might be needed to protect especially vulnerable groups

- Selecting participants equitably, so that no groups of people are unfairly included or excluded from the research

Ethical considerations are important in the research process. When working with participants, it is important to explain context of the study in a lay summary (Glesne, 2016) and review processes designed for anonymity, including the use of pseudonyms as well as the informed and voluntary consent forms. Before asking if the potential participants would be willing to participate, I shared the Lay Summary (see Appendix C)

with each young man along with the Informed Consent Form and an explanation of pseudonyms. I answered, too, any questions the participant had. I asked participants if they would like to choose their pseudonyms, and they agreed to so.

Although a breach of confidentiality is always a risk, all research materials and data sources were kept in password protected files in a locked office. Additionally, all possible precautions were taken to disguise individuals' identities so that any readers of the final representations will be unable to link participants to the study.

Written permission and approval were sought from district and school leadership to complete the research. Leadership received a copy of a lay summary (see Appendix C) and informed consent forms (see Appendix D) along with the interview protocol (see Appendix E) and my request for access. Approval was granted October 26, 2021.

Coding and Analysis

The data sets were analyzed and coded individually using in vivo coding and open coding, followed by a round of protocol coding and then, a second cycle of coding using pattern coding for triangulation. Open coding is a first cycle method of coding that involves reading through qualitative data, and coding passages according to topic. The result of open coding is a categorized inventory or index of data organized by topic. According to Saldaña (2016), in vivo coding can be helpful to understand stories or ideas through the actual words of participants, and it has also been noted for its ability to help offer a sense of nuanced meaning that other forms of coding might not allow. Because the meanings of words or phrases identified through in vivo coding can be specific to a particular culture, it is important that member checking be used to ensure the researcher

is understanding both the meaning and context-specifics of words or phrases used by participants. In vivo coding was most useful in the in-depth interview data and focus group data. As a result of my interest in counter narratives, I coded for points of contrast to majoritarian logics and stories. Protocol coding allowed me to do this. Protocol coding is the coding of qualitative data according to a pre-established, recommended, standardized, or prescribed system. The generally comprehensive lists of codes and categories provided to the researcher are applied after his or her own data collection (Saldaña, 2009).

Pattern coding was the final round of coding. It involved reading through the data and coding similarities/patterns as well as dissimilarities and contradictions (Saldaña, 2009). Because this is a critical case study, I worked toward triangulation in my pattern coding and analyzed for counter points and counter narratives to majoritarian narratives told about African American students and narratives that participants shared that reflected counter points about school and school contexts.

Triangulation, according to Patton (1999) refers to the use of multiple methods or data sources in qualitative research to develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomena. Triangulation included the analysis of the in-depth interview data, classroom observation data, and the focus group data. I analyzed my first cycle coding (in vivo, open, and protocol) across the three data sources (in-depth interviews, classroom observation, focus group) and code for patterns across the three data sources. In particular, I underscored those patterns that offer counter points and counter narratives. In summary, I conducted three rounds of first cycle coding: in vivo, descriptive, and

protocol. Subsequently, in the second cycle I coded and analyzed for patterns. When patterns were identified across all three data sources, they constituted triangulation (Yin, 2002). There may be many important data points that are not coded in all three data sources. When this occurs, I identified those data points as salient points for the reader to consider rather than a point of triangulation.

Validity, Credibility, and Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is important in research and different qualitative research traditions discuss trustworthiness in different ways. Yin (2002) borrows from quantitative paradigms in his discussion of assessing the design quality of study. Addressing construct validity, internal validity, external validity and reliability are ways he pursues quality in case study research.

construct validity: identifying correct operational measures for the concepts being studied

internal validity: (for explanatory or causal studies only and not for descriptive or exploratory studies): seeking to establish a causal relationship, whereby certain conditions are believed to lead to other conditions, as distinguished from spurious relationships

external validity: defining the domain to which a study's findings can be generalized

reliability: demonstrating that the operations of the study—such as the data collection procedures— (Yin, 2002, p. 19)

This study is a descriptive, single case study and therefore, internal validity and external validity do not align with the design. Using an audit trail though is one way I worked toward reliability, documenting each step of the research process and any changes along the way.

In critical qualitative research, Lather (2003) encouraged researchers to code and analyze for disconfirming evidence as well as for those constructs identified a priori in design. Lather calls this process construct validity. As I worked, I sought disconfirming evidence as well. As Solórzano and Yosso (2002) point out, though typically perpetrated by those in dominant positions and locations in some way, anyone can tell a majoritarian narrative. We are all subject to them. As mentioned above, I conducted member checking. Member checking is another way of promoting trustworthiness.

I implemented abovementioned standards for the duration on my project. Based on cursory review of the selected peer review articles in educational research, I anticipated that the points students shared may include: care, parental support, smaller classroom environments, and descriptions of self-efficacy. I identified data that serve as examples that do not fit patterns in my representations of findings. It is "well known…that we select, evaluate, and remember information in a way that supports our individual preferences, we fail to look for evidence that disconfirms our hypotheses, and we cannot spot errors in our own reasoning" (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006 p. 130). I kept an analysis journal and specifically document disconfirming evidence alongside other analytical notes. There was no evidence of students adopting majoritarian narratives.

Research Orientation and Positionality

I believe that research endeavors are geared toward understanding "culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world (Crotty, 1998, p. 67). I agree that learning cannot be simply transmitted to the learner, but students actively construct knowledge in their own minds with other knowledge. Constructivist conceptions of learning have their historical roots in the work of Dewey (1929), Bruner (1961), Vygotsky (1962), Piaget (1980), Bednar, Cunningham, Duffy, and Perry (1992), and von Glasersfeld (1995) has proposed several implications of constructivist theory for instructional developers stressing that learning outcomes should focus on the knowledge construction process and that learning goals should be determined from authentic tasks with specific objectives. Von Glasersfeld (1995) stated that learning is not a stimulus-response phenomenon but a process that requires self-regulation and the development of conceptual structures through reflection and abstraction. This reflects my thoughts about the learning process because its central aim is to expose students to knowledge interpretation. I believe that the constructivist framework is an important when thinking through creating positive spaces for learning. However, after some further consideration beyond the educational context, I believe creating this project from counterstorytelling method would not only center voices of students but honor their cultural "ways of knowing". As a way to connect and build trust, I wanted their voices centered in the project. I wanted them to understand this project is a partnership process as both the researcher and participants collectively working together. For those students who were minors, I wanted parents to also understand my commitments to hearing from their sons. From recent conversations with parents of Learning Center Achievement School, there

seemed to be a general mistrust of "folks" coming in doing research. I wanted them to know that their son and I were participants in this process and that the project was one where they were inviting me into their thoughts.

From an administration standpoint, the superintendent approved the project. His support stemmed from his largely negative experiences with schooling and being enrolled in an alternative program during his junior year. He mentioned always looking for innovating projects and desire to review findings from this one. When we met, he asked, "Are you going to list the name of the school?" I explained to him pseudonyms would be used throughout the project. I reiterated to him my goal is not to save participants. My goal is to learn from them. There were defining moments in school for me, and the students' defining moments are different than mine; I wanted to learn about them and to center their voices.

As a result of my philosophical stance, I found the sets of strategies, guidelines, and tools suggested by Yin useful for the purpose of this research endeavor. From his point of view, a case study does not have a "codified" design. From Yin's (2014) stance, when making every move or decision in the research process, researchers should be able to provide the logic behind it in ways that align with the theoretical propositions and the characteristics of the case. The process is not standardized from the outset, rather the design remains flexible for needed changes as long as there is alignment with research aims.

As a local business owner, speaker and philanthropist, I have developed deep ties within the community. The Learning Center Achievement School was rebranded, the

name itself is new. Everyone is really invested in the alternative program and making sure students graduate. I have not seen that passion and commitment in other alternative programs, certainly not in the one I was enrolled in. In many instances, parents, students, and staff of the Learning Center Achievement School have interface during their visits to my creamery and/or programs and giving initiatives I participated in throughout the year. In other words, this project was personal for me. I am committed to this community and establishing research from a social and transformative lens. These connections are important because they open up spaces for conversation and representation of African American males and youth to connect in authentic ways. This agency is extremely powerful. From my personal experiences, I felt empowered as a result of seeing people that look like me in spaces that were largely dominated by White males.

Researchers Brayboy and Deyhle (2000) discussed in "Insider-Outsider: Researcher in 'American Indian Communities," the researchers' dual positions of "insider/outsider" and the potential ramifications of those locations and positions in particular research contexts. As a term in research, "Insider/Outsider" refers to one's position and location in a research context and is related to positionality. They referred to an insider as one who conduct research with population of which they are also members so that the researcher shares an identity, language, and experiential base with the study. Whereas an outsider, refers to one who conduct research with population of which they do not share similar backgrounds or experiences with the group under study. However, the identities of "Insider" and "Outsider" often are not static, complicating the framing itself. Brayboy and Dehlye carefully examined four case studies: a Black woman interviewing other Black women; an Asian graduate students in the US interviewing

86

people "back home"; an African professor learning from an African businesswoman; and a cross-cultural team studying aging in a non-Western culture, and ultimately, they highlight the need to conduct research that uses collaboratively established theoretical frameworks with participants.

Chapman et al. (2018) highlighted the challenges associated with conducting research with participants who share similar racial and socioeconomic backgrounds and schooling experiences. They posited, "higher education provides minimal intellectual space to fully examine what it means for Researchers of Color to document the lives of their brothers and sisters who are often living painful realities" (p. 97). Through their usage of critical race theory methodologies, "the conversations concerning representations, relationships, and scholarly recognition become more intense and complicated" (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). When conducting raced based research, they stressed the importance of researchers serving as critical tools in conducting race-based research in racially diverse learning spaces. The study took place in five high schools represented across four suburban districts close to a Midwest metropolitan area. Interviews conducted through twenty-two focus groups of four and five students, and 90 Students of Color. The purpose of this study was to better understand the achievement gap and make changes to enhance curriculum efforts for student engagement and academic achievement.

One distinctive tool highlighted in this article was the deployment of a cohesive research team approach. The research team consisted of two African American women, one Latina, one Korean man, and one Hmong woman. As stated in the article, all five

members of the research team used identical instruments for data collection. Findings revealed themes of institutional, structural, and social barriers to teachers, community members, and district across the five schools in the study. Another point of consideration was the epistemological and ontological positions of research members. They acknowledged their privileged positions as university researchers but remained "vigilant about the ways is which privilege and positionality work within and among groups to maintain hierarchies of power and instantiate the status quo" (p. 103). As Alcoff (1995) reminded us, "anyone who speaks for others should only do so out of a concrete analysis of the particular power relations and discursive effects involved" (p. 111). Secondly, we must understand the "bearing of our location and context on what we are saying" (p. 111). Thirdly, as critical race theorists, our ultimate "accountability and responsibility is to the schools and students where we conducted our research" (Chapman et.al, 2004, p. 104). Lastly, "we needed to analyze the probable or actual effects of the words on the discourse of and material context" (Alcoff, 1995, p.113). In conclusion, this article called for researchers to develop deeper understandings about positionality, particularly race, class, and gender, and their impact on research.

Epistemological Orientation

Sharing my past enrollment in an alternative school prior to being expelled from traditional high school is worth mentioning to participants. I must be attentive of my positionality and how it might affect the research across the study. Additionally, it is important to reflect on it in my writing so that the reader can engage with how and why I come to this particular research. Below are some helpful tools related to positionality that

I implemented during the research process: Ongoing/explicit self-consciousness and self-assessment (Greenbank, 2003, May & Perry, 2017) and sensitivity to cultural, political, and social context (Bryman, 2016). Additionally, I continued to reflect on the ways my personal and professional experiences and beliefs about how things may influence my work (Rowe, 2014). Narayan (1993) captured the interactivity of positionality, power, and knowledge with her discussion of "positioned knowledge and partial perspectives" (p. 679) that are present in research. She posited,

> To acknowledge particular and personal locations is to admit the limits of one's purview from these positions. It also undermines the notion objectivity, because of particular locations all understanding becomes subjectively based and forged through interactions within fields of power relations. (p. 679)

Not only did I share my previous education experiences, but I also acknowledged the context of the rural South. Resiliency was paramount to my growth and development and it shaped and honed my leadership skills. For the purposes of this study, I referenced resilience in an educational environment. As highlighted in the literature, the concept of resilience has been described in three major categories of phenomena in psychological literature. The first category includes studies of individual differences in recovery from trauma. The second category includes people from high-risk groups who obtain better outcomes than would be typically expected. The third major category of resilience refers to the ability to adapt, despite stressful experiences (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990). Of the three categories, I drew from the resilience literature referring to the ability to adapt, despite stressful experiences. Therefore, I expected educational resilience may be

described in the completion of high school by students despite stressful experiences at home, school, and/or community in relation to aggregate disparate outcomes which make the thought of high school completion doubtful.

From my own personal experiences with schooling, I recognized a critical turning point. I believed I could become more, and I needed to look beyond the negative experiences with my community and learning in high school. I sought ownership and allies who believed the same. While building my personal coalition, I was reminded of the importance of sustainability and drawing on family support systems, academic, and community resources. These have supported me, support me currently and propelled me to become an effective community leader, business owner, and lifelong educator. Thus, my belief in resiliency and the respect I have for resiliency will be something I need to pay attention to as I code and analyze data in this project. Lastly, I have come to learn to think about my experiences of resiliency as something that I could not necessarily express, but it seemed more innate to me. It taught me to learn from my experiences, whether good or bad. This resulted from many factors. Nevertheless, I felt I could become more and begun committing myself to something greater. This awareness stemmed from a vision of becoming. I did not think about failing or being a failure because of my choices and experiences. I embrace them.

This way of thinking about resiliency influenced some of my thinking about schooling and learning. I have come to think about restorative practices in schools and resiliency as one in the same in educational context. As an educator, I believe our vison of our students is critical. One of the most important lessons I have learned from meeting students from all facets of life is that I already see them as the best versions of themselves. Our purpose is to learn and grow with them. I think implementing restorative practices within schools helps to cultivate learning. According to Hopkins (2011), restorative methods provides a powerful framework for changing how schools work with students and families. Furthermore, restorative practices incorporate the values of respect and responsibility, a focus on harms and needs, active involvement with all stakeholders, a collaborative and inclusive process and accountability.

Research Significance

In summary, crafting this project allowed me to investigate African American male experience on the path to graduation at Learning Center Achievement School and to represent from their perspectives what works most effectively in assisting them in achieving success in a non-traditional school setting. It is critical to understand how specific practices and environmental factors potentially assist targeted /marginalized populations in meeting academic success or failure. The research study designed was intended to understand African American male students' perspectives on the path from alternative school to graduation.

Initially, I understood the benefits of this study as threefold: benefit to youth, benefit to educational researchers studying alternative schools, and benefit to educators encountering youth across the educational process. After reflection of students' experiences and responses, I concluded another benefit of this type of study: humanity/representation in stories.

The benefit to Youth. With the goal of understanding educational experiences of youth from their own perspective throughout their transition from mainstream education to their experiences of attending alternative schools.

The benefit to educational researchers studying Alternative Schools. Understanding the variety of kinds of alternative schools would provide rich awareness for educational researchers. Additionally, understanding not only the various and diverse contexts of students' lives (Brofenbrenner, 1979, Dreier, 2002) but also how youth identities are formed by individual actions, and by structures of the schools they attend, and by the labels and the discourses associated with them (such as "at-risk") can help educational researchers (McDermott et al., 2006; Varenne & McDermott, 1998; Worthham, 2006) layer and complicate reductive interventions. Different norms and structures can shape ways that youth identities develop in the context of learning environments.

The benefit to the educators encountering youth across their Educational Process. Educational experiences of youth provide an additional layer of complexity. However, the repeated development of narratives around their lack of success, their underachievement, and their disenfranchisement (Worthman, 2006) only reifies in the minds of educators, school discipline practices and culture of academic success that these

youth are in a state of constant turmoil and distress. Educators need to be able to identify deficit thinking in their own work and in their colleagues in order to disrupt it so that they can better serve the youth that deficit perspectives target.

Humanity/Representation in stories. This research process was both emotional and liberating. I was finally able to answer the questions associated with my defining moments. The moments that made me the man I am today. This project allowed for deep introspection. The participants also engaged in introspection and evolving revelations from their lived experiences. That was/is so powerful, and filled with exuberance and humility in its highest form. I saw myself in them. The respect and trust between me and the students was developed easily. I did not see them as students but those who would make substantial contributions to this world. These young men have important narratives to share, and they appreciated the impact their stories would make with other African American males and educational leaders. I am humbled and grateful they allowed me to capture their stories. They accepted me and that is sacred. Lastly, their stories served as testaments and supported the futures they now realize are attainable.

My hope is that this project debunks countless deficit narratives that have resonated in the literature on achievement and learning among this population of students. A closer examination of the interaction of youth specifically in these educational contexts/spaces will assist school leaders and teachers thinking around why youth disconnect and reconnect and allow them to see ways to aid them in work toward their success. Next, I discuss the findings from the case study with participants.

CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to investigate African American males' perspectives on the path from alternative school to graduation at Learning Center Achievement School and to understand environmental contexts and practices aiding them in effectively achieving success in a non-traditional schooling setting. In this chapter, I discuss the results of themes that I created from data interpretation with four African American male students enrolled at Learning Center Achievement School.

As discussed in Chapter 3, I used in-depth interviews and a focus group with four African American male students. Of the four, three are on-track to graduate in May of 2022. The fourth participant received enough credits to graduate before the inception of this study. Initially, the third data source was classroom observations. As a result of the on-going COVID-19 pandemic, students moved to virtual learning. Therefore, the remaining data source became an art-based project. My choice to move to an art-based project reflected my desire to deeply listen to students, to layer what they were sharing and I was learning from them. Through a case study approach, I was able to identify emergent themes and salient points from the analysis. Below, each theme is discussed.

I conducted this study knowing that I was engaging with data from lens of counternarrative (Solórzano et. al, 2002) and that I wanted to center the voices of the students and their educational experiences. By sharing the students' experiences of their

educational placements at an alternative school, I was able to examine some of the social conditions that allow educational inequities to persist. In my discussion I address the ways that the students' counter positions and counter narratives are a part of the themes I developed. Utilizing a case study approach allowed me to engage with three different data sources and learn about salient points made in each. Additionally, I analyzed the data across all three data sources. Below, I represent a description of the students and findings from my analysis. My analysis includes a theme from individual interviews: Theme 1: "I made the decision not to fail": Refusing to Fail and Support from Important Others; two themes from the Focus Group: Theme 2: *"I believe society is designed for us to fail"*: Race, Racism, and African American Male Success; and Theme 3: "You have to take the opportunity to be more than any negative circumstances no matter what": Rejecting Labels, and Asking for Help. Lastly, the theme from the Art-Based Project is Theme 4: "I am me filled with hope, dreams, determination": Resiliency and the Desire to Succeed". The Theme of the Case is: "We are dreaming again" and had three subthemes: math, photography, recommitting to basketball; support from parents and LCAS; Rejecting and Fighting against Majoritarian Narratives

Table 4.2

Themes, Subthemes, and Salient Points

Themes, Subthemes, and Salient Points		
Theme 1	**"I made the decision not to fail": Refusing to Fail and Support from Important Others**	
	Jay: "I know failure was not an option after I realize what I wanted more out of life…I made the decision not to fail."	
	Antonio: "I decided that I did not want to end up in the same circumstances and I needed to get back into school." "[LCAS staff and teachers] viewed me differently and prepare me to graduate."	
	Darnell: "I know my parents wanted me to do more. They did not give up on me and I was worthy and believe in myself."	
	Malcom: "[LCAS staff and teachers] are so positive and supportive." "I am confident of my future and basketball."	
Theme 2	**"I believe society is designed for us to fail": Race, Racism, African American Male Success**	
Subtheme:	Great people around African American men contribute to their success	
Salient Points:	Multidimensionality of African American Male Success	Hard work
		Discipline
		Jay: "Becoming better in every aspect of everyday life"
		Antonio: "Money, status, influence" (Antonio).
		Jay: "Shut out the noise" and develop a "thick skin"
Theme 3	**"You have to take the opportunity to be more than any negative circumstances no matter what": Rejecting Labels and Asking for Help**	
Theme 4	**"I am me filled with hope, dreams, determination": Resiliency and the Desire to Succeed"**	

96

Theme of the Case	**"We are dreaming again": A Photographer, a Mathematician, Basketball Player, and a Mechanic**
Subtheme 1:	Support from Parents and LCAS
Subtheme 2:	Rejecting/Fighting Against Majoritarian Narratives

DESCRIPTION OF STUDENTS

As outlined in the methodology section, students were chosen to be a part of this study met the following criteria: African American male, enrolled in LCAS classified as high senior status according to their Carnegie units. Pseudonyms selected by researcher to helped with data analysis. Students provided their demographic information, (Appendix E) which includes general background information of each student, extracurricular activities, and post-graduation plans. The participants' ages ranged from 17-19 years old. Three of the students were considered seniors in high school at the time of this study in the 2021-2022 academic year.

Demographic information revealed all of students had post-secondary plans beyond LCAS. Two of the students planned to attend a technical school or community college; one of had an aspiration to join the military following graduation, and one had planned to attend a four-year college or university. Pseudonyms are used to protect their identities.

Table 4.3

Description of Student Participants

Student	Age	Academic Classification	High School Referral	Extra-curricular Activity	Post-secondary plans
Jay	19	Graduated/Attending Technical College	Orangeburg City	Mechanic	College
Antonio	18	Senior	Lake	Math	College
Darnell	17	Senior	Scott	Photographer	Military
Malcom	18	Senior	Orangeburg City	Basketball	College

JAY

Jay was 18-year-old senior at LCAS at the time of this study. At the time of data collection, he was enrolled at a technical college. From our interviews, he mentioned his family moved around a lot. He attended three schools prior to arriving at Orangeburg City High School. His placement at LCAS resulted largely from excessive absences from class. While describing his experiences prior to LCAS, he noted that he was "working two jobs" and struggled to keep up with his studies. Absences led to his placement at LCAS. Jay reflected on how his decision to work supported his long-term desire to

98

become a business owner. He also shared a deep regret regarding his path choices. If he could get a "redo", he shared, things would have been different or had a different outcome. He reflected on deciding to quit one of his jobs,

> Man, I know working two jobs was a bad decision, but I could not see any other choice to have money in my pocket. You see I wanted to own my own mechanic shop. My family support my choice but said that my time was stretched and I needed to quit. I made the choice to do so because my decision would pay off in the long run.

He was involved at an early stage in working on vehicles. While describing his upbringing, he noted that starting when he was a teenager he would often watch his uncle and others work hours fixing cars. He would fill in and grab tools they shouted out in order to help him learn about the car or problem to fix. He carried that level of responsibility in his classes as well. He considered himself a hard worker and focused on being successful. He desired to complete high school and attend a trade or technical school to become an automobile mechanic.

ANTONIO

Antonio was an 18-year-old senior at Lake High School. Lake High School was the only high school he attended prior to his placement at LCAS. He returned to Lake High School after being expelled his senior year for selling marijuana on the premise. He describes himself for having an affinity for numbers which supported his curiosity to sell marijuana. He said his favorite subject is math. While describing himself, he indicated that he is "cool" and "determined". He thinks most of his friends would agree with his

self-assessment. His math teachers would confirm he had the highest average of anyone of his peers in math classes. His peers would often ask him for help with geometry, statistics, or fractions. He mentioned during his expulsion that he had a lot of time to reflect and mature, citing seeing his friends graduating and leaving for college.

Antonio felt as though his environment was a constant reminder of stagnation. When I asked him to explain what he meant, he stated, "Man when you look around and nothing has changed. Like drugs are everywhere and people don't want more out of life". He said that it was "depressing" and that he did not want to "end up like that". He mentioned math as one vehicle to take him out of "the hood". He wants to attend college and major in Business and Finance. Additionally, he wants to open his own investment company back in his hometown. He believes by doing so, he can slowly change negative images of his community. He wants to provide funding to local businesses and create an investment group for the purpose of investing around his community:

> Selling marijuana was out of curiosity at first but as time progress I thought of applying the same skills to math and my other classes. You see, it came naturally to me, and I realized the concept of mathematics and business is the way to improve myself and put money in my pocket. I started tutoring others and making money that way instead of wrong way.

DARNELL

Darnell was a 17-year-old senior at Scott High School. He only attended one high school prior to his placement at LCAS. He was involved multiple incidents but the one that led to his placement was fighting his close friend and accidentally hitting a teacher.

100

Darnell was a member of the basketball team but was suspended indefinitely because of his school disciplinary records. He considered himself more mature at the time of the interview with me, primarily learning from those experiences and wanting to make something out of himself. Darnell loved taking pictures and considered himself a "great photographer". He attributed his eye for photography from understanding how certain "images speak to him". In fact, he shared recent photos with explanations of his perspective. This information is included in supplemental information from this project. He stated photography grounded him and described himself as someone who focused on being relevant. He stated he was not a fast learner but knew where to find answers. When he attended classes consistently, he stated his peers would consider him to be a student leader. He attributed part of his current academic success and upcoming graduation from LCAS to one specific teacher. He also credits his change to his parents and not wanting to disappoint them. He stated:

> I know I am worthy of more in my life because of the sacrifices my parents made. I am the youngest of three. My parents both worked two jobs to put my brother and sister through college. It was tough growing up because sometimes we without having enough food in the house. Lights being turned off. Bills stacking up and never stopping. Repo cars and such. Man, it was hard, and I realized I was only making matters worse by not taking my education seriously.

Darnell wanted to enlist in the military. He believed this decision would provide more structure and discipline for him. He mentioned that college could be a possibility if he received tuition assistance from whatever branch he enlisted in. He indicated he wanted to make a career out of the military and be of service to others.

MALCOM

Malcom was an 18-year-old senior at Orangeburg City High School the time of the study. He only attended one high school prior to his placement at LCAS. His placement in LCAS resulted from poor academics. He noted that he was great at basketball and desired to go junior college for one year and then the National Basketball Association (NBA). He was 6 foot and 3 inches and weighed 205 pounds at the time of the interview. He thought basketball was a way out for him. He shared a deep regret for not paying attention enough in class. He felt like a superstar at the games and often led the team in points scored. In fact, he was a starter. He reflected on all the attention he received from school. I asked if he could explain what he meant by his comment about a lot of attention:

> When you are starting in every game and leading the team to victory, you have sort of a celebrity status. You don't have to ask for anything. Matter fact, I did not have to complete any assignments. Everyone, look the other way, man. It was a great feeling at first. I would just show out on the court and show up for class the next day and not do anything.

Basketball was the only option for him, and he recalled conversations with his parents about playing in the NBA and getting them a big house. He wanted them to be debt-free. He considered himself "street smart" and "laid back". In his mind, the NBA was still an option for him and driving factor for completing LCAS. Malcom was on-track to graduate with good academic records and made positive strides in completing college applications. He mentioned that he does not want to be stereotyped as a "dumb jock" and expressed an alternative plan to get a degree in Human Performance and Recreation. He

believes it would allow him to become a college basketball coach.

Through the data collection from demographic profile sheets, individual interviews, focus group, and art-base activity, I was able to understand perceptions of students and perceived barriers in their educational experiences. The following sections provide a discussion of each theme and summarize the responses given by each student. Within this section, quotations from individual responses, focus group responses, and the art-based activity are summarized.

Individual Interviews Responses

Theme 1: "I made the decision not to fail": Refusing to Fail and Support from Important Others

When asking students to describe their perspectives on their placements, including their defining moments, they shared similar sentiments. During the interviews, Jay, Antonio, and Darnell associated some of their defining moments with encouragement from parents and Darnell from one teacher in particular. Malcom referred to the way the staff at LCAS wanted him to succeed. All four students refused to fail. All of the students wanted more out of life.

For example, Jay described the pressure related to underperforming:

I knew failure was not an option after I realized what I wanted more out of life. I was standing in my own way. Once I decided to quit one of my jobs, I made the decision not to fail.

I asked Jay what motivated him to graduate and pursue college: "Well, I would

103

set a goal to be in the top 20% at LCAS. I would be intentional about everything I did with my time. I manage my time better by setting this goal and sticking to it."

Antonio attributed his commitment to graduation as a gradual process recognizing his skills in math, perceptions of his peers, and the steadfast support of this parents. As a result of his affinity for mathematics, he was able to apply a certain level of skill sets in mathematics and in his other classes at LCAS.

I did not want to be a negative product of my environment. People started seeing me differently in my classes and asking me for help with math. I was becoming a leader and had a second chance to change from the choices I made that led to me being expelled.

When I asked him if there was anyone else who contributed to his outlook for graduation, he indicated:

My parents was there the entire time man. I did not understand it at first and thought they were being too hard on me. I realized later that they were just pushing me because they understood what I was capable of. I see and understand that now.

Darnell stated that his passion for photography opened his mind to images and how they made him feel. "I am great at photographer. Images can say so much. They serve as an escape from reality and sometimes a reminder of it. There is so much more in the world". When I proceeded to ask him if he could explain his last comment, his elaboration included references to his parents and one teacher in particular.

Well, taking photo or looking a one gives you a snapshot and art can do the same

too. But, thinking about the story behind it can lead to so many different thoughts. I know my parents wanted me to do more. They did not give up on me and I was worthy and believe in myself. Also, I had a teacher Ms. Austin, who pushed harder than any other teacher.

I asked him if he finalized his enlistment requirements. "Yes, I am ready to go!"

For Malcom, basketball was a vehicle to changing his current environment. He realized the stereotypes of related to being an athlete. His defining moment was a conversation he had with his parents about being debt free.

My plan couldn't just be basketball. I needed to think beyond that. I believe a backup plan is good because I am able to go to college and get a degree too. That is something I did not understand before because I thought basketball was the only way. After realizing the only support, I had was my parents and not the high school, I decided to have a plan B. I was let down once before and felt like the school believed in me but that was not true. At LCAS, it is different because they want you to be successful.

I asked him how he knew that the school staff wanted him to be successful. He responded, "Because the classroom is smaller, and you can just tell in the way they speak to you. Like, they believe in you and want you to graduate."

Throughout the interviews, students identified key resources important to succeed. Parental support and LCAS director and teachers' support were critical for Jay, Antonio, Darnell and Malcom. The following responses followed the question: What and who do African American male students identify as important in order to succeed? Jay shared that his teachers, guidance counselor and parents helped and pointed out the differences between his experiences at other schools and LCAS.

> My teachers, guidance counselor, and parents really helped. At my other schools, I felt like I was alone and did not know how to succeed. It was one thing to have support from my parents but they could not attend classes with me. Once I enrolled at LCAS, my parents and I met with guidance, director, and the teachers from the classes that I would be taking. It was a group approach. I realize I was not alone. They believe in me and I started believing in myself. Like, they were firm and expected a lot but I understood this meant they cared about me. Aside from them, the director of LCAS would call me weekly to check on my progress and teachers would too. I could stay after class to talk with them about questions I have in class or about graduation. I felt like they went above and beyond.

Antonio, shared that he believed that he had to do everything on his own before LCAS. Specifically, he shared that he felt alone and did not know how to succeed. It was not until he felt he was a part of the LCAS community that he began to trust in their investment in him and their belief in his success. For clarification, I ask him to explain more about what he meant. He said,

> Well, I felt like my parents never gave up but everyone else did. During the time I

106

was expelled from school, I was just sit at home and do nothing. Around me

everything else felt the same to. Nothing positive, same people hanging out on the

corner. Going to school or even enrolling in college seem so distant. I decided that

I did not want to end up in the same circumstances and I needed to get back into

school. At first, I was a little scared to open up and let people in. I guess that was

my level of comfort, well, maybe protection. LCAS staff and teachers requested a

meeting with me first, and later my parents. During this meeting, I met all of my

teachers, the guidance counselor, and director. They made me feel like I was the

only one that matters. They pulled my transcript and we all reviewed it together.

They also put together a graduation plan for me. That right there, meant so much

to me. They viewed me differently and prepare me to graduate. I came out of my

comfort zone more and became a leader and trusted them. We all had the same

goal. Later, they met with my parents to reconfirm their expectations and support

of me graduating from LCAS. I think what I appreciated the most was I felt like

they were family. I could approach them about anything and they always made

time for me.

Darnell, identified his parents and Mr. Lewis, who supported the basketball team and

taught at LCAS, as important resources to succeed. Darnell shared that

Mr. Lewis would attend many of my games before I was kicked off the team. I

know he was not only there to see me play but the fact he took the time out to see

the team made me believe he cared. Come to find out he taught at LCAS, too. I

felt like he was approachable, but it was not until I met him the first time at

LCAS. He was very cool and smart. I felt an instant connection. He did not see

107

me as a failure but someone who was already successful. Being the youngest of three, I felt like I should have made better choices but he shared with me about his tough upbringing, too. I did not want to let him or my parents down. If he could change his life, I would, too. He mentioned he was once homeless and raise by his grandparents who sacrifice, too. Our stories had similar things in common. He was more of a mentor to me. He would meet with me and the other teachers weekly to make sure I remain on track for graduation. Other teachers helped me, too. They made me feel wanted and supported but I consider him and my parents to be my biggest supporters.

Malcom, admitted that he did not trust teachers at LCAS at first:

I had my parents and basketball coaches. That was it. It took me a long time to let other people in. I felt this way because of I spent some much time between the court and home. Everything was so routine. Basketball practice, games, home. When I arrived to LCAS, I felt like everyone was fake because they are so positive and supportive. I was not use to this outside of my parents and coaches. They did not know or spend time with me. How could they be so excited and want to make sure I was good? Well, that all change during our first meeting with the director. She had a way of making you feel like the only one in the room. In fact, we did not talk about graduation requirements at first. She just wanted to hear from me about my expectations and how could she help me graduate. That meant so much to me. I could let my guard down. Our second meeting included teachers and parents, too. This meeting helped us develop a plan towards graduation. I am meeting with guidance to discuss scholarship opportunities for

college. My former coaches are connecting with other college coaches, too. I am confident of my future and basketball.

All the students identified that their parents, and the director and teachers at LCAS were important to their success at LCAS. For Malcom, who played basketball, his coaches remained important as well. In addition to parental support, the students discussed the consistent support and follow up from teachers at LCAS, and the positive environment of LCAS. The environment was so positive that Malcom doubted its authenticity at first.

As Antonio and Malcom recalled experiences from their former high school, they felt alone. They believed that only their parents cared about them. In contrast, the staff of LCAS onboarding process was comprehensive, caring, and offered concrete options for graduation. As a result of weekly debriefing, they, along with Jay and Darnell, felt valued and included throughout educational experiences. The juxtaposition between their experiences at their high schools before administrators referred them to LCAS and their experiences at LCAS could not have happened at a more important time. All the participants wanted to succeed and the onboarding process and consistent follow up from staff and teachers at LCAS increased their levels of commitment to doing their best with a second chance afforded to them. The students all emphasized how significant the onboarding process had been for them.

The team of LCAS staff appear to have served as mentors and advocates, and the students trusted them. The LCAS staff and teachers appear to have been instrumental in assisting students in reaching their academic goals.

Respectively, each student described a refusal of failure and determination and credited the support of significant others: their parents, the team of LCAS, and for Malcom, his coaches as all helping them pursue completion of high school.

The students held favorable perceptions of LCAS teachers and the overall school environment, and they expected more from themselves. Here, I observed an important salient point leading to how each student's perceptions changed. They thought of themselves differently, and the team at LCAS also thought of them differently, too. Students benefited from closely knit relationships with teachers, director, and guidance counselor. The classroom environment and after school opportunities to meet with teachers and team of LCAS positively contributed on-track graduation status. Lastly, having high expectations and emotional support from parents and LCAS team attributed to overall academic improvement.

Summary

Despite having different experiences prior to placement in LCAS, students communicated a drive to succeed, family support/expectations and teacher expectations and support. Specifically, they emphasized parental support contributed to their desire to graduate. In many instances, defining moments stemmed from a combination of having higher expectations of themselves, from parents and teachers and parental and teacher support. In other words, students changed their outlook after starting LCAS and started seeing themselves differently. For Malcom, emotional and academic support was offered from a teacher, Mr. Lewis, too. Each student discussed the LCAS environment in contrast to their former schools.

Parental involvement includes "any parental attitude, behavior, style, or activity that occurs within or outside the school setting to support a child's academic and or behavioral success in the school in which they are currently enrolled" (Abdul-Adil and Farmer, 2006, p. 2). Spera (2006) noted that student engagement increases for African American students when they perceive their parents to have high expectations for their success. For Jay, Antonio, and Darnell parental support and expectations were significant.

In addition, all of the participants in the study emphasized the importance of the structured support and availability in the school environment. For them, the support was a vital factor and facilitated positive outcomes. Researchers (Stewart, 2008; Toldson, 2008) have found that school environments and climates are critical factors that affect success for African American students. Specifically, Martin, Fergus, and Noguera (2010) noted that "academic performance is positively supported by students getting along with their peer and adults in the school, regardless of their backgrounds, feeling that they belong at the school, and feeling safe at these schools" (p. 4). The participants believed that staff and teachers at LCAS were invested in their success and felt connected to LCAS. The school environment supported those connections through the onboarding process, consistent follow up that included positive reinforcement, and specific plans for graduation.

Focus Group

Theme 2: "I believe society is designed for us to fail": Race, Racism, and African American Male Success

During the focus group, I asked students additional questions about their

educational experiences and how they described success. All commented that successful characteristics African American males should be contingent upon the type of industry. After asking them what characteristics they admired, the group came to agreement that they admired integrity, passion, determination, and intelligence. After hearing those four characteristics, Jay layered our conversation with:

> I do not think characteristics are as simple those. I believe certain environments are indicators of success. How do you perform every day not just when you are working or goal setting? You do not have to be extremely smart. Some great leaders are only great because of the people around them.

I could see the others thinking about Jay's explanation, and the students shared examples of the idea Jay introduced. They named people they admired that were great leaders because of people around them. Darnell noted, "That does make sense. I could name a few leaders that fall into that category: Byron Allen, for one. Antonio blurted out, "President Obama, for two! Malcolm added, "Of course, you know I am going to name someone in basketball! I am going with my guy Kobe Bryant!"

I probed deeper in an effort to understand what traits they admired. "Leadership" was a common trait they all mentioned. Jay said, "I do not have a specific leader that comes to mind, but I like people that work hard, well discipline at becoming better in every aspect of everyday life. This is important to self-development". Jay added more dimensionality to the group's response. His additions were impactful. Students defined success in their own terms. Antonio indicated that,

> We all listed people we admired but I think they are who they are because of the

fact that they obtain money, status and influence. This allowed them to be great

leaders but they were not accepted primarily because of their skin color.

Antonio talked about racial bias across institutions and society. He explained that Black

men are "not accepted" because of their skin color regardless of facilitators of success,

e.g., money status, influence.

Jay echoed Antonio's beliefs about racist stereotypes and the endemic nature of

racism.

Yeah, we are constant being watched and it seems like the news is always

showing negative images. I try to shut out the noise but I admit you got to have

thick skin in order to keep pushing in this society. I think that is what keeps me

hungry for more, too. When I tell people that I attend LCAS, I get like a strange

stare. You can see instantly that they made up their minds about. I admit I was the

same way at first. Stigma is real. Now, not so much because I moved on with my

life and doing well.

Jay named "stigma" here. His strategies to navigate racism are to "shut out the noise"

and develop a "thick skin". The racism and stigma that he and the other participants

address are countered both in the arguments they presented and by their everyday,

ongoing engagement at LCAS on the path to graduation and matriculation in college.

Darnell reported his admiration of Colin Powell in particular, saying, "This is

what I admired about Colin Powell. He faced a lot of issues because he was Black. I

believe society is designed for us to fail". The entire group of students cosigned Darnell's

last statement. And Malcolm added, "You have to take the opportunity to be more than

113

any negative circumstances, no matter what".

Here, the students acknowledged the significance of racism in the lives of successful African American men. Success did not protect Colin Powell from racism. Success did not protect President Obama, or other prominent African American males from experiencing racism. This was a significant point and it spoke directly to the fluidity of race and racism. In his book, *How to Be an Antiracist,* Kendi (2019) noted that

> many of the disparities between Black and White communities in the United
>
> States are an outgrowth of a long history of discriminatory and dehumanizing
>
> laws and policies that have created and exacerbated inequality in almost every
>
> sphere of life. As a result of discriminatory and dehumanizing laws and policies,
>
> fundamental structures are inherently and deeply embedded and form "the
>
> foundation for structural racism. (p. 28)

The compounding of historical and present-day factors of structural racisms (Kendi, 2019) has produced cumulative effects in the lives of Black people and meant Black people tend to have a higher exposure to structural risk factors and heightened awareness of structural risk factors. All of the participants recognized structural racism and the complexity and relentlessness of racial bias across institutions and society.

I represent in detail this point in their conversation, because the students complicated and expanded on one another's ideas of success and because the multiple ways they described characteristics of success challenge monolithic stereotypes about successful African American men. In the context of African American males, it important to acknowledge the diversity and complexity of representation here. Their concepts of success included being a "leader", "self-determination", "hard work" and "discipline" as

well as "money, status" and "influence". Two points that all of the participants agreed upon were that African American male leaders experienced success because they were surrounded by great people and that regardless of the combinations of characteristics of success, including "money, status" and "influence", African American men still faced racism. Leadership and success does not protect African American men from racial prejudice. The details are intended to illustrate not only the common points the participants shared but also the diversity of perspective they offered. It is important to note as well that Jay offered two strategies for mediating the ever present racism African American men face: "Shut out the noise" and develop a "thick skin". Jay's comment rovided an insightful commentary about the impact of race and racism in the United States. He also introduced a counter-point to challenges associated with educating African American males'. He acknowledged stigma associated with being Black and male, and critiques the larger society for perpetuating them. He was clear about not allowing opportunity structures to negatively impact his future.

As discussed in Chapter 2, student voices must be included in the conversations. These perspectives are critical to the improvement of educational outcomes. Throughout the interviews, focus group, and art-based project, the students continued to offer their critical reflections about effort and ownership, including ownership over self-definition. The complexity and diversity in their experiences, coupled with the ways they counter-storied experiences of African American men offer some insights and recommendations as to what can improve educational opportunities for African American boys and young men.

Celious and Oyserman (2001) noted that scholars must steer away from a

115

homogenous examination of race and instead consider a heterogeneous group perspective. According to the model they developed, it is important to recognize the ways within-group differences and distinctions among individuals of the same race influence daily interactions, experiences with and perceptions of each other. Their model provides a conceptual lens to explore within-group difference and intersections of perspectives.

When asked what their first perceptions of the charter school were, the students had mixed responses. "I did not know what to think", said Darnell. Antonio had negative perceptions, admitting that he "thought it was a high school for bad kids." Malcolm agreed with Antonio. "Well, I just thought of it as an opportunity for a second chance," said Jay.

Students offered accounts of challenging circumstances. Next, I will discuss how those very circumstances motivated them to do better.

According to (Delgado, 1989), majoritarian narratives speak from a standpoint of authority and universality where the experiences of a dominant group, i.e. Whites, are held to be normal, standard, and universal. As Solórzano and Yosso (2002) noted counternarratives function as a sort of antidote to majoritarian narratives which contribute to rationalizations of social inequality in ways that mask how oppression and discrimination work. Challenging majoritarian narratives is important not only in the context of histories and the war that exists between stories but also because counter narratives produce oppositional knowledge which challenge and contradict majoritarian experiences (Delgado, 1989) and invite attention to unequal and inequitable social relations.

The participants provided critical context in the telling of their stories and countered majoritarian narratives. First, they expressed general awareness of not only the existence of racial prejudices but its pervasiveness. They shared personal experiences and stereotypes they countered inside and outside of school. Relatedly, they articulated and agreed that success did not protect any African American men from negative experiences of race and racism. In their descriptions of success, money, status, and influence could not protect African American men from racism. Antonio explained, successful Black men are still "not accepted". Second, they described successful African American men as men surrounded by people who helped make them great – another point of agreement. Similar to the individual interviews, I heard in the focus group that support from others was significant. Finally, developing coping strategies, to navigate potential issues resulting from race and racism was important and inevitable. Learning from their personal encounters, identifying and resisting stereotypes, and strategizing against them has provided the students with skills that they are using as they progress toward graduation status. Deepening their practice of goal setting and achievement, for each respectively in photography, math, basketball, and as a mechanic, meant that their aspirations were connected to their everyday reality in ways that empowered them and layered their resistance to the inevitable racism they face.

Theme 3: "You have to take the opportunity to be more than any negative circumstances no matter what": Rejecting/Ignoring labels, and "Asking for help".

Another theme from the focus group was Theme 3: *"You have to take the opportunity to be more than any negative circumstances no matter what"*: Rejecting Labels and Asking for Help. In discussing first impressions and experiences at LCAS, the

participants described both their own perceptions and those they noted others made about them. All the students shared how encouraging their respective onboarding process was and the significance of ongoing support.

Students acknowledged largely negative experiences at previous schools compared to experiences at LCAS. They felt the onboarding process was important to their acclimation of their transition before enrollment. Students were included in the planning for their future academically. Collectively, teachers, parents, and support team ensured each student represented in this study understood anticipated outcomes. The LCAS staff' and teachers' perceptions of students aligned with the mission of LCAS, which is to help students graduate and develop academic, social, emotional, career and life skills that will lead to productive citizenship (LCAS handbook). While enrolled, they highlighted weekly debriefing sessions and progress to graduation sessions. They explained how helpful the resources were and mentioned opportunities for studying and teacher support after school.

As we discussed their experiences at LCAS, I asked the focus group what advice they would give other students. When I did, the students discussed how important it is to reject labels and negative stereotypes and to find ways to define yourself. Additionally, all of the students spoke about how essential it was to ask for help.

Malcom shared:

My experiences taught me some of the best lessons of life. I learned to not allow them to determine my future and use them [as] a motivation to be better. I know how we can be labeled and society might agree, too. But we can control our own destiny with the choices we make. That is the advice I would tell students to achieve well-being and

success.

Malcom talked about societal labels and stigma African American males experience. His comment about controlling his own life reflects his empowerment and hopefulness, as well as his refusal to let other people define him or systems of racism deny him that control. He mentioned as well the smaller classrooms of LCAS and sense of belonging he felt from caring teachers and support team. This point is reaffirmed in his statement, "Like, they believe in you and want you to graduate."

Jay noted the importance of his experiences leaving his high school and attending LCAS. He responded:

I think experiences are important. Without them how can you grow? I don't have any regrets. I am living out one of my goals by enrolling in college. I will always remember the second chance and the people who made it happen. I would tell students to see the bigger picture and to not let your environment assign negative labels to you. Ask for help and remember there are resources to help but you have to want it and ask for it.

Jay articulated the importance of determination and desire to want more out of life. His vision of his circumstances changed as did what mattered most in his future. He also changed how he viewed himself and the active role he needed to take to pursue his goals. For him, rejecting ways an "environment" can "assign negative labels to you" was critical. He believed that "hard work", "discipline", and the constant need for "self-development" were essential, too. Lastly, Jay notes the importance of resources and asking for help.

119

Darnell provided encouragement to others, saying:

I am breathing. I am grateful for my parents and LCAS. Everyday, I am able to

open my eyes is a blessing. You do not have to be a product of your environment.

You can become anything you want out of life. No excuses. Forget negative

things. Do not let them become stumbling blocks. Find what you are good at.

Then, make sure you build a network of people to help you achieve wellbeing and

success. Do be afraid to ask for help.

Like Malcom and Jay, Darnell believed that you do not have to be a product of your

environment. His parents wanted more for him and he acknowledged he wanted more

from himself, too. Forgetting the negative things and "finding out what you are good at"

helped him change his perception and work toward success. Darnell's path is control

through his own choices. His self-determination is clear, and he highlights the point of

asking for help. Darnell is not a passive participant in his future. He understands the

importance of asking for help and finding wellbeing and success through building a

positive network of support.

Antonio attributed changes he made to "believing in your purpose" and to the

support that his parents and LCAS provided.

All of what has been said is so true. Believing in your purpose. Parent's

involvement and support. Ask your teacher for help and set higher expectations.

Another thing is believe that failure should be not viewed as negative all of the

time. Because each of us probably would not have a good future if it was not for

LCAS and our parents. We think and move different, too. We are dreaming again

and believe we can be more than just locked up or written off. Students need to

know your wellbeing and success is determine from how you see yourself.

Antonio agreed with how important a sense of belonging is, which Malcom shared, too. He noted that asking for help and setting higher expectations for oneself were essential. Antonio also indicated that "money, status" and "influence" aid African American men in success but that societal acceptance of African American males is nonexistent. In other words, he was figuratively and literally saying there are alternative opportunities to achieving success and that, being "locked up" or simply "written off" by society should be resisted in African American men's vision of self and future. Their future goals are concrete in new ways as a result of their sense of empowerment and support from parents, and specific structures of support from the LCAS team.

Summary

The themes the students shared were important because they revealed their keen awareness of how they understood and navigated critical times in their lives and their commitment to succeed. Often, statistics of African American males paint a different picture entirely. These statistics can be found as a result of mass incarceration, stereotyping, implicit bias, and racism (Davis, 2007). Aside from statistics, the heightened level of scrutiny African American men face reinforces divisive, majoritarian narratives and perpetuates negative racial stereotypes, stigma, and labeling.

For the students, race and racism are barriers they encountered and were reminded of in terms of racist societal norms as they discussed successful African American men. They identified racism in both their immediate community and the larger community of African American males including those who are leaders. Despite the success and

121

characteristics of leaders they admired, students collectively believed that it is hard to be Black, male, and successful. Students believed racial prejudices are just unavoidable.

During the focus group, I noted that the students embodied admirable confidence and were empowered to move forward and commit to positive outcomes even as they acknowledged unavoidable racial prejudice. They did not associate experiences with former schools and rejected larger social, majoritarian narratives that attempt to define African American men from deficit perspectives. They defined their own stories countering through their own lived experiences and their shared ideas racist stigma and stereotyping.

The ways students complicated and challenged majoritarian narratives about who was a successful African American man generated ways to strategize against them. They shared how African American men can navigate the everyday racism that majoritarian narratives reproduce. The majoritarian narrative about African American males has long identified variety of negative school experiences and outcomes. Howard, et.al, (2008), noted these experiences and outcomes include school failure, excessive and unnecessary special education assignments with data to support placement, suspensions, expulsions, and violence.

Art-Based Activity

I created Theme 4: "I am me filled with hope, dreams, determination": Resiliency and the Desire to Succeed" from the art-based activity with the students. The last section of data represented here was constructed from the students responses to the poem "Where I am From," by George Ella Lyon. I chose this poem because I found it to be an important point of reflection for me on my own journey, and because I think it touches on themes of

identity, culture, community, and history.

The poem follows.

Where I am From

I am from clothespins,

from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride.

I am from the dirt under the back porch.

(Black, glistening,

it tasted like beets.)

I am from the forsythia bush

the Dutch elm

whose long-gone limbs I remember

as if they were my own.

I'm from fudge and eyeglasses,

from Imogene and Alafair.

I'm from the know-it-alls

and the pass-it-ons,

from Perk up! and Pipe down!

I'm from He restoreth my soul

with a cottonball lamb

and ten verses I can say myself

I explained to the participants that this part of the project was a way for them to creatively write about their experiences. The instructions were to use the poem and

describe their own experiences in a similar format. I shared that the activity would be included in the final write-up of my work and met with each participant individually about it. Although I had not been sure how they might respond, surprisingly, they were receptive to the art-based activity. I discussed activity during our focus group and allocated time to talk through specifics. Afterwards, I met with each student individually to hear any thoughts they had about the activity.

The general consensus was that the activity provided a platform for self-expression. I remember Jay's response, in particular. He asked, "Is this something like creating our own 'bars' to spit?" "Sort of," I responded. In hindsight, I thought about other potential forms of self-expression or activities that could elicit content about their identities and experiences. My initial thoughts about selecting this activity stemmed from my desire to see how students interpreted their own unique stories and histories. I wanted to invite their engagement on deeper level in a creative way. I hoped to learn more about their ideas of identity and community and their stories and histories.

Their creation of their own poems followed individual interviews and the focus group discussion. I met virtually with each student about week after the focus group. I worked around their school assignments and tried to be I wanted to be considerate of other time constraints. The students sent me their poems through email when they finished them. After reading each poem, I asked students to discuss them with me individually. I did not want to misinterpret the meaning they intended in their poems. Below, I include parts of each of our discussions along with my analyses.

Across the four participants reflections and content of each poem included themes

I describe as "Resiliency" and "A Desire to Succeed". The following section includes

each student response. The format of the poems are as I received them in their original

form from each student.

Jay:

I am from the future,
We met not to long-ago you might know me a pain But
sometimes I call you despair
Once define by my environment
I couldn't share but then I met hope and we spoke We can
together and discuss and look for Someone yet to know
but then I realize dreams and
Determination are to close not to see and recognize
It is me, one in the same. Not distant future but reality.
I am me. That me. I am talking to me. A reality determine by me
I am free and not from the future but I am me filled with hope, dreams,
determination.
I guess I can be free not define by and anything but me.

Jay positioned himself from "the future" and describes his poem as a conversation between his

former and current self. His former self was talking about the decisions that he made prior to

LCAS that negatively impacted his life. His current self was trying to make sense of why and

how he came to make them. He named those experiences as "despair" and described the way

his "environment" had defined him. Even in Jay's remembrance of "despair", he met "hope".

And in "hope" there was a future moment not yet known about who he will be.

"Determination" and "dreams" were also a part of his wrestling with the "despair" and

unknown for Jay and he gathered the past up into the present in "It is me, one in the same. Not

distant future but reality." His despair marked a pivotal moment for him. Jay made room both

for the "despair" and "Hope, dreams, determination." He shared the meaning with me this way:

> We do not set out to be in despair but what else are we accustom to? I understood
> this as my life, and now, I understand that experience in the context of my future

as I am enrolled in college. There is another way. Hope, dreams, determination. We all meet in not so distance places. I am not in the future but in reality, and I know, the two is equivalent to one. I am free to dream and not define by anything but me.

Jay realized his strength was his own decision making, he could create his own reality and move beyond uncertainty. Calling on "hope, dreams, determination" was one way he confronted the uncertainty and responded to the "despair". He emancipated himself from a life of excuses and reclaimed his story and authorship.

I could not help but think about the symbolism and consciousness in describing two selves. Jay's juxtaposition of a former and current self-caused me to pause and reflect on the transformation that he captures in "I am free to be me"—the nexus of realizing his own liberation. This is a testament to his life.

Antonio:
I am from haze,
from a state of confusion and fun.
No one seems to care but the numbers
must add up. Everything moving so
*   quickly and night and days are swiftly,*
I chose numbers and they chose me. They do not speak or ask more of me
I think it is to be complacent in this life
When everyone else is too. Friends are collected
And you are cool. Time is uncontrollable. It must be more. I should stop. This is one
Environment and not the only. I don't know
Anything else. I feel stuck. It has to be more.

Antonio referred to "haze" as a point of origin and "a state of confusion and fun" and shared with me that his poem was a reflection of his former dealing of drugs. He said that although he had "fun" during that time, he experienced paranoia, too.

I was trying to describe the current state of paranoia I was in and fun I was having, too. You see, I did not believe I was being stagnant. Everything was

126

moving so fast, and I was making so much money, too. But in this condition I was

wasting away, everything I wanted to be was replace with a desire to fit into the

climate. And in this, it was drugs. I use them and sold them. I made excuses. I

understood the world of numbers because of drugs and wanting more financially

for myself and parents.

Antonio's poem was full of contrast, "fun" and "confusion" and time seeming to move

quickly – "everything moving so quickly and night and days are swiftly," – and Antonio

feeling "stuck". Antonio described the complacency and no one caring in his experiences

as well. The poem reflected a period of stagnation. Antonio explained that he became a

product of his "Environment" and realized that there "has to be more." Specifically, he

used his skills of mathematics to capitalize on this work. He remembered trying to make

the best of his circumstances until he lost what had been his purpose. He shared that he

knew there had "to be more" and struggled with finding a way out. He reminded himself

that "This is one Environment and not the only." In his poem, he mentioned too, that

"friends are collected". Here, I wanted to investigate what he meant by that. Antonio

elaborated:

I had a lot of people who knew what I was doing and would just want to be

around me. I did not know a lot of them, so why did they like hanging around me?

It was because I was a means to assisting to get high.

Antonio's desire to fit in was important but he recognized in retrospect that "Friends are

collected" because he was a way for them to get high. He knew that there was more to his

life and started thinking about applying mathematics in a different and positive way.

Darnell:

> *I am from the streets,*
> *from a place known by some many and traveled*
> *by a few. The court made sense. I am fighting to*
> *be free and determine to show the world*
> *there is more to me. I felt untouchable until*
> *I lost the battle and lost myself. I from wanting*
> *a second chance and not trusting.*
> *I am from seeing everyone else through a lens*
> *and thinking it couldn't be me,*
> *I am from thinking of stories from each picture,*
> *I am from capturing every moment. This can be me.*
> *These pictures tell more and I can tell my own.*

Darnell shared "the streets" as an origin and placed himself as one of the "few" who have "traveled" them. In contrast to "the streets", he described the court as a place that "made sense". Being on the "court made sense" to Darnell, and he felt safe when he was playing basketball. He felt like it provided structure.

In school, he struggled with constant disciplinary challenges and shares "he lost the battle and lost himself". Basketball alone could not provide him with all that he needed to face all the challenges he encountered. Even though the structure of basketball and support from coaches provided a foundation that he needed, basketball as a fan-supported sport at the school worked against him. The larger school environment favored sports over academics and when he only performed well in the former, he was not held accountable in the latter. It was, in the end, the many infractions in school led to his suspension from basketball. After suspension, Darnell admitted that it was hard to trust anyone but he knew he desired a second chance.

Photography provided the second chance he desired, because it exposed him to a new world and one he could create and control. With every image he captured, photography confirmed to him that there is more to life than basketball. Ultimately, Darnell found another version of himself through photography.

128

Malcom:

> *I am from the Drive where police cars*
> *Are on every block. I am from a place where everybody*
> *Knows everybody,*
> *I am a place where you either involved with crime or you try to do something*
> *good to get out, I am from a place*
> *where people of my community automatically*
> *thinks I should be a basketball people because*
> *of my height and skills on the court,*
> *I am from not letting people tell me what I should be anymore*
> *I am from the thought that my height does not define me*
> *I am from if people really got to know me they will see there more to me*
> *I am from being tired of people telling me I have one choice in life*
> *I am from wanting more and going to do more*
> *And prove to everyone that Malcom is going to make*

Malcom referred to a physical place of origin as Darnell did. A unique young man, Malcom shared wisdom and insights across his poem. He did not seem not overly confident but knew he had a lot to offer this world. In his poem, he offered layered perspectives, his own of himself, other of him, and imagined others who may meet him in the future. He challenged the stereotypes he often received as a result of his "height and skills on the court" and the monolithic idea of basketball as *the* way out. Even though he described the community that he lived in as laden with crime, he was optimistic about getting out. In contrast to the stereotypes, Malcom defined for himself his own way out and made it happen. He concluded his poem with: "I am from wanting more and going to do more. And prove to everyone that Malcom is going to make".

He came across as very caring about the people in his community. Malcom chose basketball and college despite mistakes he made in the past. He named himself as responsible for his future in his own definition of it, and I sensed his remorse for some of the decisions he made. In our interviews, he described a clear and direct path to college.

Summary

The students imagined different futures. The pursuit to succeed and the role of

self-definition were important. For each of them, self-definition and goal setting became an integral part of their imagined futures. Through using photography, math, basketball and hours working as a mechanic, their aspirations became grounded in their everyday decisions. Each set of respective skills aided them in how they were making sense of their future selves. The embodied and material engagement with photography, math, basketball and work as a mechanic established their future beliefs and plans in new ways. They all shared that they know there is "more" – more to be, more to become, more to life. They know, too, that self-definition is possible: Darnell wrote, "this can be me" and Malcom wrote, "I am from wanting more and going to do more".

The data across sources included the following themes: Theme 1: "I made the decision not to fail": Refusing to Fail and Support from Important Others; Theme 2: "I believe society is designed for us to fail": Race, Racism, and African American Male Success; Theme 3: "You have to take the opportunity to be more than any negative circumstances no matter what": Rejecting Labels, and Asking for Help, and from the Art- Based Project, Theme 4: "I am me filled with hope, dreams, determination": Resiliency and the Desire to Succeed". A critical point from the Theme 1 was the sheer will of students to be move beyond former circumstances and accept the support that was present in their lives from parents, and LCAS staff and teachers. Theme 2 from the Focus Group highlighted prejudiced societal perceptions of African American males and the endemic nature of racism (Bell, 2004) the students recognized. Theme 3 from the Focus Group reflected the students' insistence on the importance of asking for help and refusing the labels, stereotypes, and stigma others might try to assign to them. Lastly, Theme 4 from the Art-based project captured the students' future aspirations and their determination to bring their dreams to fruition.

Theme of the Case

Although I believe each of the previous four themes accurately and evocatively reflect the data within each data source, typically, in a case study, the researcher pursues saturation of data points across an analyses of data sources. With this standard in mind, I have constructed also a Theme of the Case. The Theme of the Case: "We are dreaming again": A Photographer, a Mathematician, a Basketball Player, and a Mechanic and two subthemes: (1) Support from parents and LCAS; and (2) Rejecting and Fighting against Majoritarian Narratives represents saturation of data points across the individual interviews, the focus group, and the art-based project. The students own work through their transition away from their high schools and toward self-definition in aspirational and in material ways is reflected in the Theme: "We are dreaming again": A Photographer, a Mathematician, a Basketball Player, and a Mechanic. The students' visions for their future successes required a recommitment and for some a retooling of particular skill sets. There is a real severance here between the ways those who would use deficit ideas to frame these four students and the ways they think about them themselves. There is a distinct separation between racist stereotypes and what these four students are committing to daily at school and college, in basketball and in photography and in deepening skills in math and as a mechanic. They are dreaming and enacting their futures in their own terms.

Due to the ever present references to support from critical, important others in the individual interviews and focus group, I created a subtheme reflecting support from parents and LCAS staff and teachers as well. A critical point in this subtheme is the students' awareness of the significance and intersections of support as a lever. Lastly, the

131

students outright rejection of majoritarian narratives, racism and deficit perspectives in discussion from the focus group and in representations of their art-based projects meant constructing a subtheme that made visible their awareness and strategies of resistance against racism as they continue to grow and develop as leaders themselves. The data is representative of students' responses.

Concluding Thoughts

There is little research examining the experiences of African American males on the path to graduation from an alternative school. This study sought to understand four students' experiences as a case. I employed the idea of majoritarian and counter narratives from Critical Race Theory as I engaged with the what the students shared with me (Delgado, 1989). In this case the students revealed experiences that were connected to structural racism in ways that intersected with their educational realities. As Masko, (2008) posited, CRT is a helpful guide in countering single-truth claims from dominant beliefs concerning African American male youths and school achievement.

In this study, I attuned for counternarratives as I engaged with what the students shared with me. Although all students recognized that being an African American male came with unique set of challenges, they also articulated ways to complicate definitions of success, adopt commitments to self-definition and strategies to reject majoritarian narratives. Their authorship and goalsetting reflects their desire to succeed and their resiliency. They all remained committed to improving their circumstances. Each student acknowledged experiencing pervasive racism and accepted that it is an inevitable condition of U.S. society. Specifically, they recommended setting goals, utilizing resources and asking for help and challenging the status-quo of stereotypes about African

132

American men.

As discussed above, the absence of African American males' perspectives in educational research must be remedied. African American male perspectives are critical to include in conversations about educational opportunities. As Delgado and Stefanic (2001) discussed, counternarratives constitute agency for African American males as they counter many of the prejudiced, racist rhetorical accounts of their identities that frequently position them as culturally and socially deficient, uneducated, unmotivated, prone to violence, and anti-intellectual. Two examples can be found below: Jay's comment, "I know failure was not an option after I realize that I wanted more out of life." Another example can be found in Antonio's statement, "I decided that I did not want to end up in the same circumstances and I needed to get back into school." Both share aspirational sentiment that counters majoritarian stereotypes about African American men.

In this chapter, I wanted to center the experiences, and insights of African American males. As reflected in themes above, I think it is critical for educators, and important stakeholders, to listen to the voices of African American males.

Despite the many challenges that could have easily negatively impacted educational outcomes, the students were hopeful about their academic and career goals. Their persistence included both support from parents and LCAS as well as their own individual motivation and effort. Students did not internalize the negative societal prejudices nor did they adopt negative perceptions about LCAS. An encouraging, individualized, student focused onboarding process at LCAS was no less than transformative for them. The team of LCAS embraced them and created opportunities to

foster positive relationships. Concurrently, the students own efforts, commitment, vision

for the future have contributed to their connected to their academic success.

Lastly, in my analysis, I noted that among their long list of characteristics of success, the

students did not mention obtaining monetary gains. Their characterization of success

included working hard, discipline, surrounding oneself with great people, asking for help

and building positive networks. They also expressed general consensus toward the

importance of self-actualization, regardless of challenges they have encountered and will

encounter during their educational and career goals. Their characterizations of success are

yet one other example of a counter position to a majoritarian narrative of African

American men.

CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study explored perspectives of four African American male students on the path to graduation at an alternative school. In this chapter I synthesize the findings represented in the previous chapter and offer considerations for LCAS. A critique of the strengths and weaknesses of the study is included as are implications for future research, policy, and practice. In this chapter, I sought to establish connections between the findings and the literature and to produce recommendations for consideration in the education of African American male students.

It was not known how African American males enrolled in alternative schooling programs experienced those programs. It was not known how they perceived the ways that attending an alternative education program impacted their paths to graduation. In this critical qualitative case study I utilized the idea of counter narratives as I engaged with my analyses (Delgado, 1989; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

As was represented in the themes from Chapter 4, how participants perceived themselves, their experiences transitioning to and studying at LCAS, and how they described experiences of African American men more broadly illustrated both exceedingly positive experiences at LCAS and the pervasiveness of racism against African American men in the U.S. Specifically, the themes were: Theme 1: "I made the decision not to fail": Refusing to Fail and Support from Important Others; two themes

135

from the Focus Group: Theme 2: *"I believe society is designed for us to fail"*: Race, Racism, and African American Male Success; and Theme 3: "You have to take the opportunity to be more than any negative circumstances no matter what": Rejecting Labels, and Asking for Help. Lastly, the theme from the Art-Based Project is Theme 4: "I am me filled with hope, dreams, determination": Resiliency and the Desire to Succeed". The Theme of the Case is: "We are dreaming again": A Photographer, a Mathematician, a Basketball Player, and a Mechanic; and two subthemes: (1) Support from Parents and LCAS; and (2) Rejecting and Fighting against Majoritarian Narratives. In the next section I discuss the findings from Chapter 4 in relationship to each research question and the literature presented in Chapter 2.

Discussion of Findings

This study offers new information from African American male students attending an alternative school. Howard (2008) suggested that research on African American males can only become more holistic and inclusive when those in charge listen to African American men's unique thoughts about their educational experiences. In addition, Professor Marc LaMont Hill (2009) underscored the importance of listening to urban youth because listening can help healing evolve. Hill contended that healing can lead to the "therapeutic dimensions of personal and collective storytelling…that exposes and produces new possibilities" (p. 65). My aim to detail that which the participants shared was because of my commitment to listening to what they had to say. This study is critical work because of the focused representations of the students' ideas, beliefs, and experiences - ideas, beliefs, and experiences that directly speak to the ways that race and racism intersect with their educational experiences. In addition, the findings of this study

extend what is known about the ways that alternative education can improve educational outcomes for African American male students.

Research question 1. The first research question of this study explored the ways that African American male students described their perspectives on their placements. In the interview protocol, eight of the 18 questions were focused on this research question. In the focus group protocol, three of the six questions were dedicated to this question.

Even though each participant's experiences prior to attending LCAS were different, they each shared positive self-perceptions and experiences at LCAS. They all agreed on how encouraging the onboarding process was at LCAS and described the staff and teachers as supportive. Negative perceptions of LCAS were ascribed to others who heard the name or learned that one of the participants attended the school. They were not shared amongst the participants themselves. One student, Antonio, did mention that he felt like the school was going to be a bad experience for him only to be surprised that he could trust in the encouragement extended to him and in the success he experienced while attending LCAS.

The participants talked freely about the ways that they discovered their potential and new hobbies that created new goals and passions, for example, photography. Their time at LCAS was a much-needed opportunity to reflect on their shared desire to succeed and to recommit to their own success. For them, LCAS was an environment where staff and teachers believed in them and where they felt like they could be successful.

The themes identified in this study developed from individual interviews, focus group, and art-based activity, reflect many of the same connections in the literature on

alternative schools. According to researchers (Bruin & Ohna, 2013), "successful alternative schools had flexible learning environments, individualized learning, and strong teacher student relationships which work together in a symbiotic and synergistic approach to improve student learning" (p. 1103). The environment of LCAS implemented these strategies which led to positive improvement for these four students in particular.

Research question 2. The second research question was developed to explore the ways that student participants described their paths to graduation and the defining moments that got them there. On the interview protocol, four of the 18 questions were related to this research question. On the focus group protocol, one of the questions was focused on understanding students' paths to graduation. Many of the responses provided by students were related to the development of their internal motivation and the support that they received from their parents and staff and teachers at LCAS.

Students shared shifts in their mindsets once they began attending LCAS. There was contrast between the ways each participant thought about his choices and circumstances prior to LCAS and after beginning at LCAS. Once they committed to their success with specific goals, and with the explicit, concrete and consistent support from staff and teachers at LCAS, they also were able to commit to the goal of graduation. When it came to defining moments, students disclosed the ways that their parents rallied to support their goal of graduating as well. Parents provided support, encouragement, and affirmations for these young men that kept them moving toward their goals. For Malcom, his basketball coaches offered support as well. In individual and group interviews, and the art-based project, students offered their reflections on their processes of authorship

138

and self-definition. They began to see themselves differently, not as troublemakers, but as young people who have a chance to succeed despite their referrals to LCAS. One student, Darnell, even declared during his interview that he did not want to be a negative influence anymore, and decided to become a leader at LCAS. As discussed in the literature about alternative schools in Chapter 2, Quinn and Poirer's (2006) case studies on alternative high schools emphasized that characteristics of effective alternative education should include psychological well-being strategies, and incorporate intentional parental involvement across a student's matriculation.

Another area that the themes represented was authorship, self-definition and self-empowerment. These points were not anticipated and future educational research ought to attune to them. I believe they were crucial interrelated processes that had a positive impact on the students.

Research question 3. The final research question guiding this study was related to the way that students understood success and what they thought was important to their success. This question included prompts that primed student to reflect on the resources and people who were important to their success at LCAS. They were asked to share their perceptions of their teachers at LCAS and to identify the roles that were important to them played by staff and teachers at LCAS. There were six questions associated with this question on the interview protocol. On the focus group protocol, there were two questions associated with this research question.

When it came to the LCAS' staff, each student was able to name a teacher who had had an impact on them. When asked to describe why those teachers were so impactful, students almost always referenced the relationship they built with the team of

LCAS. The students participating in this study felt motivated to realize their academic potential because they felt like their teachers cared about them and were invested in them despite the decisions and mistakes they made prior to attending LCAS.

When it came to being successful at LCAS, like the first two questions, students referenced the importance of their parents' encouragement, too. Because their parents were invested in their success, including their academic success, the students found additional motivation to be successful.

The resources that students consistently named as important for their success was the meetings they would have with their counselor, the director, and their teachers. That group approach to academic planning made students feel supported at school. Students also discussed the ways that the director of LCAS would call to make sure that they were on track toward their goals. That accountability was a welcome change for these students. They reported that knowing the staff at LCAS was invested in their success prompted them to take their academic efforts more seriously than they had at their previous schools.

Overall, students had a favorable perception of LCAS. They were consistent in identifying their teachers as well as their parents as the people who were most important to their success. As far as resources were concerned, the students frequently discussed the support that they received in the group academic planning sessions. The group planning session held critical significance for these students. The personal interest that the staff of LCAS took in these students was important to them, too.

I was interested in how the students thought about success and the larger social construction of success for an African American man. I wanted to invite a layered

reflection at a meta level. As such, I asked specifically during the focus group for the students to reflect on the characteristics of successful African American men. While students insisted that the environment was a contingent condition of how success was defined, they did identify having great people around you for support and specific characteristics - integrity, passionate, determined, and intelligent.

They also identified the ability to lead as an important factor of finding success. Through the course of this conversation, there were consistent references to the role of race and racism. Students explained that regardless of how many characteristics and qualities of success an African American man might have, he would always face racism. This belief made them feel as though no matter what one's success as an African American man is, facing racism would be inevitable. In *Silent Covenants: Brown v. Board of Education and the Unfulfilled Hopes for Racial Reform*, critical race theorist, Derrick Bell, argued "[R]acism is an integral, permanent, and indestructible component of this society (2004). Bell suggested that the landmark case, Brown v. Board of Education, offered an unfilled dream of racial reform.

Bell's (2004) analysis of *Brown* and critique of several policy decisions in U.S. legal history led him to develop what he described as the racial-sacrifice covenants and interest convergence covenants. The covenants "sacrifice the freedom interests of blacks to resolve differences of policy making Whites," (p. 38), for example, protecting slavery in the Constitution to ensure ratification by the Southern states. "Black rights are recognized and protected", he posited, "when and only so long as policymakers perceive that such advances will further interests that are their [Whites'] primary concern" (p. 49). In other words, racism is endemic and only when certain interests are met of the

141

dominant group (Whites) can such advances or changes be considered. The students recognized and strategized against the endemic nature of racism.

As discussed in Chapter 2, it is essential for educators to address and integrate into curriculum and for educational researchers to do more research on culturally relevant and sustaining frameworks. It is of the utmost importance for African American males to see successful African American men in all societal facets. From the educational context, these frameworks are critical to discussions about what meaningful pedagogy is for African American children and securing educational opportunities all for students of Color. As mentioned in Chapter 2, research on schooling and African American males used a deficit paradigm rather than a positive, asset-based approach. Thus, incorporating culturally responsive and sustaining practices builds learning capacity while at the same time recognizing rich knowledge, culture, identities African American students have. Culturally responsive and sustaining practices have been connected to increases in academic achievement as well (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

Relationship to the Previous Literature

Previous researchers (Kohl, 1994; Kushman, 2003; Solorzano & Delgado, Bernal, 2001) have documented the types of resistance, or refusal to learn, that students are inclined to demonstrate when they believe their intelligence, dignity, identity, or integrity is compromised by a teacher, an institution, or when they believe in a deficit-driven mindset. This project represents four African American males at an alternative school who defied deficit perspectives and engaged in their learning.

As researcher Howard (2008) contended, one of the problems in studying any groups of students, and particularly Black males, is that there is a tendency by researchers and practitioners to pay particular attention to those who are at the bottom end of the academic continuum. Throughout the series of interviews, focus groups and art-based activity the students expressed authorship over their own lives, a desire to succeed, the lesson of asking for help, and fierce determination in the face of inevitable racism. Clear goal setting and support from LCAS and parents aided them in their success. These representations complicate ideas about who is in an alternative school and what their experiences are.

I conclude that the schools the students attended prior to LCAS did not embrace the students holistically or actively contribute to their academic learning opportunities. I would argue that simply relying solely on behavior patterns and negative disciplinary outcomes lessened any opportunity they had to graduate from previous schools.

As evident through conversations with students, each took ownership and agency of decisions leading to their enrollment into LCAS. Researcher, Mickelson (1990) referred to this as the attitude-achievement paradox, in which Black males understand the importance of education, yet often do not put forth the effort due to their beliefs that opportunity structures for them can be limited. In learning from the students' narratives, I conclude that their personal experiences, especially parental support, helped contribute to their academic success and reflects community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). Community cultural wealth, referenced from Yosso's (2005) research, suggests that many students of Color possess the types of capital that allows them to navigate trying circumstances.Concurrently, critical to conversations about African American males and

143

achievement is understanding the significance of cultural values, influences, and that they are not homogenous. Although each participant referred to the support of their parents, each student transition to LCAS occurred under particular circumstances. The particularities of each experiences are as important as the concept itself, for their particular experiences constitute the saturation of the themes.

Implications

There are several implications that this research may have on alternative education programs for African American males. Throughout the study, the students' descriptions of their experiences were often centered on the consistency of relationships and team approach that staff at LCAS had with students. As a result, the findings of this study suggest that building and maintaining meaningful relationships with students is important to their success, particularly in alternative education programs. These relationships were the cornerstone of providing academic supports for the students. A team approach, relationship building, and structured goal setting seem critical elements for alternative schools to consider developing with professional development.

Professional development for staff is a critical component of improving the alternative education experience for African American males (Baldwin, 2011). In order to determine where teachers are with relationship building, alternative school directors might consider observations of teachers' interactions with students. These observations could provide insight into where professional development is needed when relationship building and collaborative support approaches are so essential.

The next area that students reported consistently was the importance of having supportive learning environment while attending LCAS. Because of this support students had a renewed sense of focus in school. The information taken from these findings can help those who run alternative education programs improve the programming offered to students. These findings can also help amplify voice to where alternative education leaders should focus their efforts when it comes to the improvements. Using the findings of this and other studies to guide improvement efforts could potentially lead to increased positive outcomes for African American males.

According to researchers (Beachum and McCray, 2004), there remains a growing need for evidence-based programs that promote the well-being and success of African American youth. As result, issues such as negative peer influences, random violence, feelings of isolation from the cultural mainstream and negative images in television media and music (Martin, 2008) reinforce maladjustment and challenging behaviors among African American youth. Therefore, in order to maximize culturally inclusive schools and classroom environments, outcomes should promote evidence-based well-being and success programs, increase a sense of self-empowerment, and promote positive self-definition.

Theoretical implications. The use of CRT as a framework continues to highlight the need for analyzing the ways that race and racism continue to be present in institutions, structures, and discourses in the U.S., including structures and institutions of education. The referral process itself and alternative schools are pertinent examples. Specific to educational research, CRT scholars often examine the ways structures, institutions, and discourses of education reproduce inequality and inequity. In education, there is no

denying the influence of race and racism due to the ways that students of Color experience significant differences in education, from access and academic success to disciplinary responses to them (Groves Price, 2017).

In the current study, CRT scholarship on majoritarian and counter narratives helped me analyze the data (Delgado, 1989; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Students were invited to voice to their own experiences in a way that allowed them to reflect on the power of their experiences and to reflect on the characteristics and qualities of successful African American men. Students shared feeling empowered at LCAS not only by their academic success, but also by their ability to shift their mindsets and behavior to something more positive for each of them. They authored new definitions for themselves, completed concrete academic goals, and imagined futures of success.

Using the findings of this research, education leaders and researchers can build in opportunities for students in schools and in inquiry projects to share their stories and share them in creative ways. The reflective process the students experienced through LCAS and in some way through the process of engaging in the project allowed them to imagine a different future for themselves and one that included academic success. It is my hope that opening spaces for such reflection inside school contexts and outside school contexts will lead to increased success for African American males both inside and outside school.

Practical implications. Practical implications of this study are taken from students' commentary around the resources that were most helpful to their success at

LCAS. The two resources that were most beneficial to them were the school staff and the collaborative academic planning structures.

Relationships with school staff. Students consistently described the ways that their relationships with school staff inspired them to work towards realizing their academic success. School staff regularly checked in with students, encouraging them to see themselves beyond the reasons that caused them to be enrolled in LCAS. The staff were intentional about encouraging their students, taking interest in the activities that they were involved in outside school. While that may not be feasible for all teachers, there is something to be said for taking an extra moment to check in with a student on a personal level, especially those who are attending alternative programs.

From a practical sense, these relationships should be embedded in the culture of the school. That means that all staff, regardless of position, should be invested in pursuing the highest expectations for students' educational success. When teachers are unsure of the ways to do build and maintain relationships with students in meaningful ways, school leaders should be ready to provide targeted professional development. Relationship building can be a mutually beneficial exercise for both students and teachers.

Collaborative academic planning. The other practical area that students emphasized was the collaborative academic support that was provided to them by teachers, counselors, and the director of the school. Having a collaborative and comprehensive approach meant a system of support was in place. Students who attend alternative education programs are already typically disengaged in the educational process; having a collaborative system of support to help students feel supported was

147

actually the best practice at LCAS and may be instructive in other alternative education settings.

Strengths and Areas for Refinement in the Study

There were strengths and areas for refinement in the study. The study was an exploration of African American males' perspectives on the path from alternative school to graduation. The strength of this study lies in its research design and methodological approach. Using a qualitative case study allowed me to gain a deep understanding of the students' experiences through individual interviews, a focus group, and an art project. The art-based activity was an additional strength in the project and I think allowed the students to creatively reflect on their experiences and author self-definition. Sharing the poetry they wrote invited students to reflect deeply on their experiences. I was able to ask probing questions that allowed me and them to develop a greater understanding of how the students saw themselves both before and after attending LCAS.

Another strength of this study was the care I hope the students felt from me as the researcher. My aim was to treat the students as co-researchers during data collection. Their stories were held in the highest regard and were communicated in the findings exactly as they were communicated to me. I worked hard to establish rapport with students and their families so that they could show up as their most authentic selves in the project and to respond to questions freely. This felt especially true when it came to the focus group. The students heard each other's stories and saw their own experiences embedded in the experiences of their fellow participants. That led to a synergy in the group where the students felt free to cosign and expand upon each other's thoughts.

There were few areas that I would consider refining in the study's design. First, the interview protocol was not developed in a way that made it clear to participants that they were being encouraged to share their perceptions of their experiences at LCAS. Instead, many of them focused on the ways that they felt others perceived them because of their enrollment at LCAS. While there was enough information in their responses to draw conclusions about their experiences at LCAS, there was a missed opportunity to develop robust narratives from students.

Only four students were interviewed, so the experiences that are presented in the findings belong to a small group of students. Having a larger group of participants may have provided more complexity across a larger range of responses regarding students' experiences at LCAS.

Recommendations for Policy, Practice, and Research

The findings of this study may be useful in informing future leaders of alternative education programs how African American males experience education in those programs. The recommendations for policy, practice, and research presented in this section are applicable to district leaders, school leaders, and state decision makers. It is important to note here that, while these results are not generalizable, the findings provide a starting point from students' perspectives for discussions around improving the educational experiences of African American males in alternative education programs.

Recommendations for policy. Black students are over-represented in alternative schools/programs and the school-to-prison pipeline (Cole, 2021). They are also more likely to be suspended and expelled from school during the K-12 years than their White counterparts (Booker & Mitchell, 2011). This pushout of African American students is

related to the existence of the school-to-prison pipeline, which is supported by budgetary decisions made by the U.S. government. When students are not being pushed into jails and prisons, often they are pushed into alternative education programs that may or may not meet their academic needs. To curb this growing trend, policymakers at all levels need to be paying attention to the results that alternative programs are achieving with students. Additionally, state and district leaders should work to ensure that alterantive education programs receive adequate funding and support to meet the needs of the students they serve.

Recommendations for practice. Generally, students need positive reslationships with their teachers (West, 2013). This is especially true for students who are attending alternative education programs (National Council of Professors of Educaitional Adminsitration, 2014). Previous research has found that caring, and committed teachers were the most important reasons for students' successful completion of alternative education programs. As such, leaders of alternative education programs must continue to encourage the cultivation of positive relationships between teachers and students.

To make this a recommendation a reality in alternative schools, there are several best practices that can be implemented. Quinn and Poirer (2006) named the following practices as being most effective in alternative education programs:

- Program administrators and staff subscribe to the philosophy that all students can learn.
- Programs communicate and support high expectations for all students' positive social, emotional, behavioral, and academic growth.
- Program and school administrators are leaders who support the vision and

mission of their programs; effectively support staff; listen to teachers, students, and parents; and genuinely care about their students.

- Low adult-student ratios in the classroom are considered integral to successful outcomes.

- Teachers receive specialized training (e.g., behavior and classroom management, alternative learning styles, communication with families) to support their effectiveness in working with students who do not succeed in traditional educational settings.

- Interactions between students and the staff are non-authoritarian in nature. Positive, trusting, and caring relationships exist between staff, and between students and staff.

- The opinions and participation of family members in their children's education are valued, and students' families are treated with respect.

There are several practices to highlight in this list. First is the belief that all students can learn. When it comes to students in alternative schools, there are often negative perceptions regarding the students' attitudes towards school. This leads to them being written off before they can begin to shift their mindsets to something more positive. Alternative schools where there is a firm cultural belief that all of the students are capable of success are more likely to experience high rates of success (Gordon, 2010). Work with policy makers needs to capitalize on these practices.

Another practice to highlight is the importance of relationships that emphasize support and collaboration. The students participating in this study consistently emphasized the role that supportive teachers and school staff played in their academic success. Once they knew that they could depend on their teachers for academic support, the students in the study began to reach for academic success in a way that they had not done at their previous schools. That relationship building should also extend to students' families and external systems of support.

An additional recommendation for practice is to engage external organizations that can provide services to students in alternative education programs. While there may be existing relationships between alternative schools and social services organizations, the findings of this study suggest that there are other meaningful ways to reach students. Establishing partnerships with organizations that can introduce students to new experiences, skills, or opportunities may provide additional ways to keep them engaged in school.

Recommendations for future research. This study was focused on understanding students' experiences related to attending an alternative education

program. There are other important areas related to student success in alternative education programs that can be explored. Each student spoke to the important role that a parent or guardian played in their educational success at LCAS. As such, one recommendation for future research is to explore parents' perceptions of the impact of alternative education programs on their student's academic success and personal mindset. This would potentially add another dimension to the existing research because it would allow parents to share their experiences with alternative education programs as well.

An additional recommendation for future research would be to engage teachers who work at alternative schools. Teachers are quite influential for students and understanding their motivations and perceptions of alternative education programs will only enhance what is known about the strengths and weaknesses of alternative education. It would also be interesting to see the results of future research that explored the perceptions of both teachers and students simultaneously.

Conclusion

My decision to focus my research on lived experiences of African American males on the path to graduation from alternative schools stemmed from personal and professional experiences. This study resulted from feeling othered as an African American male who attended alternative school. Since then, it has been a driving force for me to understand how other African American males are experiencing alternative education with the intent to dramatically improve those educational experiences and increase the culture of expected success.

Because Black students are over-represented in alternative schools/programs and

the school-to-prison pipeline (Cole, 2021), it is critical that we understand their experiences and use them to drive improvements in the way that teaching and learning happens at these schools. Doing so not only potentially improves their life trajectory, it also disrupts the school-to-prison pipeline. In order to realize that goal, however, there are best practices that every alternative education program must have in place. At the core of those practices is the relationships that students have with alternative school staff.

The findings of this study have demonstrated that African American males can have meaningful educational experiences at alternative schools. The findings also demonstrate that school staff and external systems of support play a significant role in the success of these students. Finally, it can be also be concluded that collaborative systems of support are a practice that alternative school students respond to well. As such, alternative school leaders should consider developing those structures at their schools.

REFERENCES

Abdul-Adil, J. K., & Farmer, A. (2006). Inner-city African American parental involvement in elementary schools: Getting beyond urban legends of apathy. School Psychology Quarterly, 21(1), 1–12.

Alcoff, L. (1995). The problem of speaking for others. In J. Roof & R. Wiegman (Eds.), *Who can speak? Authority and critical identity* (pp. 97-119). Urbana: University of Illinois.

American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force. (2008). Are zero tolerance policies effective in the schools? An evidentiary review and recommendations. *American Psychologist*, *63*, 852–862.

Ariel, R., Karpicke, J. D., Witherby, A. E., & Tauber, S. K. (2021). Do judgments of learning directly enhance learning of educational materials? Educational Psychology Review, 33, 693-712.

Artiles, A. J., Kozleski, E. B., Trent, S. C., Osher, D., & Ortiz, A. (2010). Justifying and explaining disproportionality, 1968-2008: A critique of underlying views of culture. *Exceptional Children*, *76*, 279-299.

Artiles, A. J., & Trent, S. C. (1994). Overrepresentation of minority students in special education: A continuing debate. *Journal of Special Education*, *27*, 410-437.

Bean-Folkes J and Lewis Ellison T (2018) Teaching in a culture of love: An open

    dialogue about African American student learning. *School Community Journal*,

    28(2), 213–228.

Baldwin, A. Y. 2011. "I'm Black but Look at Me, I Am Also Gifted." In Gifted and

    Advanced Black Students in School: An Anthology of Critical Works, edited by

    T. C. Grantham et al., 13–22. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

Beachum F, McCray C. Cultural collision in urban schools. *Current Issues in*

    Education. 2004;7(5):1–5.

Bell, D. (2004). Silent Covenants: Brown v. Board of Education and the Unfulfilled

    Hopes for Racial Reform. New York: Oxford University Press.

Bruin, M., & Ohna, S. E. (2013). Alternative courses in upper secondary vocational

    education and training: Students' narratives on hopes and failures. International

    Journal of Inclusive Education, 17(10), 1089-1105.

    doi:10.1080/13603116.2012.735259

Booker, K., & Mitchell, A. (2011). Patterns in recidivism and discretionary placement in

    disciplinary alternative education: The impact of gender, ethnicity, age, and

    special education status. *Education & Treatment of Children*, *34*(2), 193+.

    Retrieved from http://www.questia.com

Boutte, G., & Bryan, N. (2021). When will Black children be well? Interrupting anti-

    Black violence in early childhood classrooms and schools. *Contemporary Issues*

    in Early Childhood, 22(3), 232–243. https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949119890598

Carson, E. A. (2017). *Prisoners under the jurisdiction of state or federal correctional*

    authoritites. Bureau of Justice Statistics. National Prisoner Statistics Program.

Celious, A., & Oyserman, D. (2001). Race from the inside: An emerging heterogeneous

    race model. Journal of Social Issues, 57, 149-165.

Cole, Nicki Lisa, Ph.D. (2021, August 1). Understanding the School-to-Prison Pipeline.

    https://www.thoughtco.com/school-to-prison-pipeline-4136170

Connor, D. J., &Ferri, B. A. (2005). Integration and inclusion-a troubling nexus: Race,

    disability, and special education. *The Journal of African American History*, *90*(1-

    2), 107+. http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=5009958603

COPS Office (Office of Community Oriented Policing Services). Officer Health and

    Organizational Wellness: Emerging Issues and Recommendations. Officer Safety

    and Wellness Group Meeting Summary. Washington, DC: Office of Community

    Oriented Policing Services, 2018.

    https://cops.usdoj.gov/RIC/ric.php?page=detail&id=COPS-W0860.

Corra, M., Carter, J. S., & Carter, S. K. (2011). The interactive impact of race and gender

    on high school advanced course enrollment. *The Journal of Negro Education*,

    80(1), 33+. http://www.questia.com

Davis, A. J. (2007). Arbitrary Justice: The Power of the American Prosecutor. Oxford:

    Oxford University Press. Harris, D. A. (1997). 'Driving while Black' and

DeCuir-Gunby, J. T., Chapman, T. K., & Schutz, P. A. (2018). *Understanding Critical*

    Race Research Methods and Methodologies: Lessons from the Field. Milton:

    Routledge.

Dei, G.J.S. 1996. "Theoretical Approaches to the Study of Race". In G.J.S. Dei (Ed.)

    Antiracism Education in Theory and Practice. Fernwood.

Delgado, R. (1989). Storytelling for oppositionists and others: A plea for narrative.

      Michigan Law Review, 87(8), 2411-2441.

De Witte, K., Cabus, S., Thyssen, G., Groot, W., and van den Brink, H. M. (2013). A

      critical review of the literature on school dropout. *Educ. Res. Rev. 10*, 13–28. doi:

      10.1016/j.edurev.2013.05.002

Donovan, M. S., & Cross, C. T. (Eds.). (2002). Minority students in special and gifted

      education. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Drug Policy Alliance, "Race and the Drug War," available

      at http://www.drugpolicy.org/issues/race-and-drug-war (last accessed June 2018).

Dumas, D. & Dunbar, K. (2015). The Creative Stereotype Effect. PLoS ONE.

Duncan, G. A. (2005). Critical race ethnography in education: Narrative, inequality and

      the problem of epistemology. *Race Ethnicity and Education,* 8(1), 93-114.

Ewing, C. P. (2000, January/February). Sensible zero tolerance protects

      students. Harvard Education Letter. Retrieved July 21, 2004, from

      http://www.edlettr.org/past/issues/2000-jf/zero.shtml

Fabelo, T., Thompson, M. D., Plotkin, M., Carmichael, D., Marchbanks III, M. P., &

      Booth, E. A. (2011). Breaking school rules: A statewide study of how school

      discipline related to students' success and juvenile justice involvement. College

      Station: Texas A & M University, Council of State Governments Justice Center

      and Public Policy Research Institute. http://csgjusticecenter.org/youth/breaking-

      schools-rulesreport/.

Fergus, E., Noguera, P., Martin, M. (2014). Schooling for Resilience: Improving the Life

      Trajectory of Black and Latino Males.

Fine, M. (1991). F*raming dropouts: Notes on the politics of an urban public high school*. State University of New York Press.

Ford, Donna Y. (2012). Culturally different students in special education: Looking backward to move forward. *Sage Journal, 78*.4: 391-403.

Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practic*e (2nd ed.): 142-153 Teachers College Press.

Gilliam, W. S., Maupin, A. N., Reyes, C. R., Accavitti, M., & Shic, F. (2016). *Do early educators' implicit biases regarding sex and race relate to behavior expectations and recommendations of preschool expulsions and suspensions?* Yale University, Child Study Center.
https://medicine.yale.edu/childstudy/zigler/publications/Preschool%20Implicit%20Bias%20Policy%20Brief_final_9_26_276766_5379_v1.pdf

Girouard, C. (2001, March). *U.S. Department of Justice* . Office of Juvenile Justice and Deliquencey Prevention. https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/fs200105.pdf

Glesne, C. Published in N. Denzin & M. Giardina (Eds.) 2007. Ethical Futures in Qualitative Research :Decolonizing the Politics of Knowledge (169-178). Walnut Left Coast Press.

Gordon, G. (2010). The other outcome: Student hope, engagement, wellbeing. Unpublished data from the 2009 Gallup student and teacher engagement predictive study. [Powerpoint slides]. https://my.vanderbilt.edu/performanceincentives/files/2012/10/Panel-5-Gordon_Gary.pdf.

Gregory, A. Skiba, R. J., and Noguera, P. (2010). The achievement gap and the discipline

      gap: Two sides of the same coin? *Educational Researcher*, *39*(1), 59–68

Gregory, A., & Mosely, P. M. (2004). The discipline gap: Teachers' views on the

      overrepresentation of African American students in the discipline system. *Equity*

      and Excellence in Education, *37*(1), 18-30.

Halliday. A., Kern. M., Garrett. D., Turnbull. D. (2019) The student voice in well-being:

      a case study of participatory action research in positive education, Educational

      Action Research, 27:2, 173-196, DOI: 10.1080/09650792.2018.1436079

Hopkins, B. (2011). *The restorative classroom.* Optimus.

Hosp, J. L., & Reschly, D. J. (2004). Disproportionate Representation of Minority

      Students in Special Education: Academic, Demographic, and Economic

      Predictors. *Exceptional Children*, *70*(2), 185–

      199. https://doi.org/10.1177/001440290407000204

Howard, (2013). Howard, C. Tyrone, Black Male(d): Peril and Promise in the Education

      of African American Males. New York: Teachers College Press., 2014, ISBN

      978-0-8077-5491-7, pp.188.

Hucks, D. (2011). New visions of collective achievement: The cross-generational

      schooling experiences of African American males. *Journal of Negro Education*,

      80(3), 339–357.

Johnson L, Bryan N and Boutte GS (2019) Show us the love: Revolutionary and loving

      teaching in (un)critical times. *The Urban Review, 51*(1): 46–64.

Justice Policy Institute. (2011). *EDUCATION UNDER ARREST: The Case Against*

      Poilce in Schools. Justice Policy Institute:

http://www.justicepolicy.org/uploads/justicepolicy/documents/educationunderarre
st_fullreport.pdf

Kendi, I. (2019). *How to be an antiracist*. Bodley Head.

Kleiner, B., R. Porch, E. Farris, and B. Greene. 2002. Public Alternative Schools and
Programs for Students At Risk of Educational Failure: 2000-01. Washington, DC:
US Department of Education.

Kim, C. Y., Losen, D. J., & Hewitt, D. T. (2010). *The School-to-Prison Pipeline:
Structuring Legal Reform.* New York University Press.

Kozol, J. (1982). Alternative schools: A guide for educators and parents. New York:
Continuum

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995/2009) *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African
American Children.* 2nd ed. Jossey-Bass

Ladson-Billings, G. (2006). From the achievement gap to the education debt:
Understanding achievement in U.S. schools. *Educational Researcher*, 35. 3-12.
10.3102/0013189X035007003.

Leone, P.E., & Drakeford, W. (1999). Alternative education: From a "last chance" to a
proactive model. The Clearing House, 73 (2), 86-88.

Lee, V. E., &Bryk, A. S. (1988). Curriculum tracking as mediating the social distribution
of high school achievement. *Sociology of Education*, 78-94.

Love, B. (2019). *We want to do more than survive: Abolitionist teaching and the pursuit
of educational freedom*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press

Marsh, J. A., Farrell, C. C., & Bertrand, M. (2016). Trickle-down accountability: How

    middle school teachers engage students in data use. *Educational Policy*, *30*(2),

    243–280. https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904814531653

Masko, A. L. (2008). Resistance at city middle school: Critical race theorizing in

    educational research. Curriculum and Teaching Dialogue, 10(1), 177-192.

    Retrieved from http://search.proquest.com/docview/230447815?accountid=

    12085

Martin, A. C. (2008). Television media as a potential negative factor in the racial identity

    development of African American youth. *Academic Psychiatry*.

McKenna, J. (2013). The disproportionate representation of african americans in

    programs for students with emotional and behavioral disorders. *Preventing School

    Failure*, *57*, 206-211.

Miller, R. (1992). *What are schools for?: Holistic education in American culture* (2nd

    rev. ed.). Brandon, Vt.: Holistic Education Press.

Mills, M., Renshaw, P., & Zipin, L. (2013). Alternative education provision: A dumping

    ground for 'wasted lives' or a challenge to the mainstream? *Social Alternatives*,

    32(2), 13-18.

Milner, H. & Howard, Tyrone. (2013). Counter-narrative as method: Race, policy and

    research for teacher education. Race. 16. 10.1080/13613324.2013.817772.

National Education Association. (2008). *Cradle to Prison Pipeline Campaign*.

    http://www.nea.org/home/31606.htm

Noguera, P. A. (2003). The trouble with Black boys: The role and influence of

    environmental and cultural factors on the academic performance of African

    American males. *Urban Education, 38*(4), 431–

    459. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085903038004005

Okilwa, N., Khalifa, M., & Briscoe, F. (2017). *The school to prison pipeline: The role of*

    culture and discipline in school (Advances in race and ethnicity in education) .

    Emerald Publishing Limited.

Oswald, D. P., Coutinho, M. J., Best, A. M., & Singh, N. N. (1999). Ethnic representation

    in special education: The influence of school-related economic and demographic

    variables. *Journal of Special Education*, *32*, 194-206.

Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance,

    terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher*, *41*, 93–97.

    doi:10.3102/0013189X12441244

Perry, T., Steele, C., & Hilliard, A. G. (2003). *Young, gifted, and Black: Promoting high*

    achievement among African-American students. Boston: Beacon Press.

Phinney, J. S., Cantu, C. L., & Kurtz, D. A. (1997). Ethnic and american identity as

    predictors of self-esteem among african american, latino and White adolescents.

    Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 26(2), 165-185.

    doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1023/A:1024500514834

Russell Skiba et al., Are zero tolerance policies effective in schools? An evidentiary

    review and recommendations. (Washington, DC: American Psychological

    Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2006); Aaron Kupchik, Homeroom

    Security: School Discipline in an Age of Fear (New York: NYU Press, 2010).

Sawyer, W. (2017, April). *How much do incarcerated people earn in each state?* Prison

Policy Initiative: https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2017/04/10/wages/

SC District. (2010). At-risk student program evaluation.

www.families4change.org/../Rich2/Eval/for/Website(2)

Sickmund, M., Sladkly, A., & Kang, W. (2018). *Easy Access to Juvenile Court Statistics:*
1985-2014 Online. National Center for Juvenile Justice.

Skiba, R. J., Horner, R. H., Chung, C.-G., Rausch, M. K., May, S. L., & Tobin, T. (2008).
Race is not neutral: A national investigation of African American and Latino
disproportionality in school discipline. *School Psychology Review, 40*(1), 85–107.

Skiba, R. J., Simmons, A. B., Ritter, S., Gibb, A. C., Rausch, M. K., Cuadrado, J., &
Choong-Geun Chung. (2008). Achieving equity in special education: History,
status, and current challenges. *Exceptional Children*, *74*, 264-288.

Skiba, R. J., Michael, R. S., Nardo, A. C., & Peterson, R. (2002). The color of discipline:
Sources of racial and gender disproportionality in school punishment. *Urban*
Review, *34*, 317–342

Solórzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (2001). Critical race and LatCrit theory and method:
Counterstorytelling Chicana and Chicano graduate school experiences.
International *Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *4*, 471-495.

Spera, C. (2006). Adolescents' Perceptions of Parental Goals, Practices, and Styles in
Relation to Their Motivation and Achievement. *The Journal of Early*
Adolescence, *26*(4), 456–490. https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431606291940

Stewart, E. B. (2008). Individual and school structural effects on African American high
school students' academic achievement. High School Journal, 91(2), 16-34.

Theriot, M. (2009). School Resource Officers and the Criminalization of Student
    Behavior. Journal of Criminal Justice. 37. 280-287.
    10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2009.04.008.

Toldson, I. A. (2008). *Breaking barriers: Plotting the path to academic success for
    school-age African-American males*. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Black
    Caucus Foundation, Inc

U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. (n.d.). *Civil Rights Data
    Collection (Data snapshot: School Discipline).*

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, "Public
    Elementary and Secondary School Student Enrollment and Staff Counts from the
    Common Core of Data: School Year 2010-11," Table 2 (Washington, D.C.: April
    2012), http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2012/2012327.pdf

Villenas, S. (1996). The colonizer/colonized Chicana ethnographer: Identity
    marginalization, and co-optation in the field. *Harvard Educational Review,
    66(4),*711-731.

West, C. (2004). *Democracy matters: Winning the fight against imperialism.* London,
    England: Penguin Books.

Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods* (4th ed.). Sage.

Zhang, D., Katsiyannis, A., Ju, S., & Roberts, E. (2014). Minority representation in
    special education: 5-year trends. *Journal of Child & Family Studies*, *23*, 118-127.

Zeiderberg, J., & Schiraldi, V. (2002). *Cellblocks or classrooms? The funding of their
education and corrections and its impact on African American men*. Washington, DC.

APPENDIX A

STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Preamble: Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. I'm interested in hearing about your experiences in school. I also want to explain that everything you share with me is confidential. Your name will not be used anytime during the transcribing from this interview or throughout this project. If you agree, an audio recorder will be used to record the interview. Please note a few questions will be asked from list below.

If you feel uncomfortable at any time, I will stop recording. Also, you may stop your participation at any time.

1. Tell me about a typical day for you.

    a. before school

    b. in school

    c. after school

2. Describe one of the classes that engages you.

    a. What are teacher/student relationships like in that class?

    b. How does the teacher teach?

    c. How would your friends describe the class?

3. What about a class that engages you less?

a. What are teacher/student relationships like in that space?

b. How does the teacher teach?

c. How would your friends describe the class?

4. What are some of the things teachers do best at LCAS?

5. What are some things that teachers could improve?

6. What do you identify as important in order to be successful?

a. successful at LCAS?

b. What resources do you think are important?

7. Who do you think helps you to be successful? How are they helpful?

a. instructors

b. staff

c. parents/guardians

d. family members (siblings; extended family members)

e. peers

f. friends

g. others?

8. What things or which people help you when things seem most difficult?

a. How does that change depending on what the challenge is?

9. When you think about your path to graduation, what are some things that you are doing to get there?

10. How would you describe your path to graduation?

11. How would your friends describe the path to graduation?

12. What defining or critical moment(s) led to your decision to graduate from an alternative school instead of returning to your previous school?

13. When you think about your previous school, how is LCAS different from your previous school?

14. Tell me about your placement at LCAS.

15. How would you describe yourself back when you were attending your previous school?

16. What changes have you seen in yourself since being at LCAS?

    a. How would you describe yourself now?

17. What advice would you give to students in order to assist them in achieving a sense of wellbeing and success?

18. Is there anything else about (school community, experience in school, interests/activities outside of school) that I didn't ask that you think is important for me to know?

19. Do you have any questions for me?

APPENDIX B
FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

1. When you think of a successful African American male, who comes to mind and why?

    a. What are the characteristics about him/them that you admire?

    b. What are the things that he/they do that you admire?

2. When you think about an "alternative school", what are your first thoughts?

3. When you think about your experiences at your previous school compared to experiences at LCAS, what differences stand out the most?

    a. What things, if anything, are similar?

4. How would you describe the attention you receive in terms of your academics? Is that different from your previous school?

5. When you think about your future goals, do you feel more or less empowered to reach them since being here?

    a. In what ways do you feel empowered to reach them?

6. What advice would you give to students in order to assist them in achieving a sense of wellbeing and success?

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN
RESEARCH STUDY

Prospective Research Participant: Read this consent form carefully and ask as many questions as you like before you decide whether you want to participate in this research study. Please feel free to ask questions at any time before, during, or after your participation in this research.

Project Information	
Project Title: Understanding African American Males perspectives on the path to graduation at an Alternative School	
Principal Investigator: Devin Randolph	Organization: University of South Carolina College of Education
Location: Learning Center Achievement School	Phone: 803-378-8800

1. **PURPOSE OF THIS RESEARCH STUDY**

- o The purpose of this descriptive, qualitative single case study is to understand components and practices of the alternative program in order to determine what works most effectively. It is my intent understand how African American male students experience Learning Center Achievement School, what and who assists them on the path to graduation.

- o Participation in this research will include a focus group interview and an individual interview and brief individual follow-up interview. Interviews last approximately 60-75 minutes and with participant consent.

- o The researcher will complete approximately 30 hours of classroom observations at LCAS as well. Observations will focus on classroom interactions. They may be one school day of observation per student participant (approximately 7 hours) or observations may be split into smaller time increments across 2 or 3 days for observation of each student participant.

- o The focus group, individual interviews, and classroom observations will be scheduled by the researcher at times and in places convenient for the student participants.

2. PROCEDURES

- o Interviews will be recorded on audiotape and later, transcribed. The audio tape and transcription will be kept by the researcher in a password protected computer in a locked.

- o Once the focus group and individual interviews are transcribed, the researchers will share the transcript so that student participants may check them for accuracy/review them for information they are comfortable seeing included in the research project.

- o The researcher will code and analyze the data looking for patterns across the interviews and classroom observations. If there are patterns, the researcher will represent them in themes.

- o Data will be maintained for completion of research and then destroyed.

3. POSSIBLE RISKS OR DISCOMFORT

- o African American students re-living their experiences can be sensitive for students. The interview questions may elicit slight embarrassment or may cause hidden emotions related to certain events to surface. The researcher will have information on hand about resources and support at LCAS as well as in the area that support mental health and well -being and will remind the participants that they have the right to refuse to answer questions they are uncomfortable with answering, may stop participation any time.

4. POSSIBLE BENEFITS:

- o The benefit to African American male youth. - Understanding educational experiences of African American male youth from their own perspectives about their transition from a previous school to a path to graduation at an alternative school

172

- The benefit to educators and educational researchers studying Alternative Schools. Understanding student perspectives on norms, pedagogies, and structures that help most in success at an alternative school and norms, pedagogies, and structures that present challenges for students.

5. FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no financial compensation for your participation in this research. There is no financial compensation for the researcher in completing this research. The research is a requirement for graduation for the researcher's graduate program.

6. CONFIDENTIALITY

- Participation and participants' names will be kept confidential. Although a breach of confidentiality is always a risk, the researcher will keep all research information in a password protected computer in a locked and secure location.

- Copies of the study will be shared with all the participants.

7. AVAILABLE SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- Any further questions you have about this study will be answered by the Principal Investigator:

Name: Devin Randolph

Phone Number: 803-378-800

8. **AUTHORIZATION**

I have read and understand this consent form, and I volunteer to participate in this research study.

___I agree to be audio recorded for this interview.

___I do not agree to be audio recorded for this interview.

Participant Name (Printed or Typed): _____

Date: _____

Participant Signature:) _____

Date: _____

Principal Investigator Signature: _____

Date: _____

December, 2021 Dear Administrator,

APPENDIX D
REQUEST FOR ACCESS

As you may be aware, I am currently pursuing a doctorate in education from the University of South Carolina. As part of my graduation requirements, I must design and complete an original research project. I would like to conduct the research project at an alternative high school program, specifically, (name). Please consider this a formal request for your permission to conduct this research project.

The purpose of the study is to understand African American male student perspectives on the components and practices of the alternative program that best support paths to graduation.

I am looking for 4-5 African American males to participate in a focus group and individual interviews. Depending on availability and recruitment, they will either be a group of current twelfth grade students or a group of recent graduates from the Learning Center Achievement School . In addition, I would like to complete approximately 30 hours of classroom observation at times that are most convenient for the school, instructors and students. Participation in the focus group interview will last

approximately 60 minutes. Interviews will last approximately 60–75-minutes. I have

attached a draft of the Informed

Consent Form for your approval as well. If approved by you, ideally the focus group,

interviews, and classroom observations would take place in late November 2021 and

December 2021.

In summary, crafting this project would assist in understanding African American males

perspectives on the path to graduation at an alternative school. My hope is that this

project will highlight what students share works best in supporting them on this path. It is

critical to understand how specific practices and environmental factors potentially assist

them in meeting academic success or failure.

If you approve the study, a short letter of support will need to be issued from you so that

it may be included in my Internal Review Board (IRB) submission for study approval at

the University of South Carolina. Once I receive IRB approval to proceed from the

university, I will provide you with a copy of the IRB and approval.

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact me directly at (803) 378-

8800 or via email at devinlamontrandolph@gmail.edu. Thank you for your consideration

and I look forward to hearing from you regarding the status of this request.

Devin Randolph

APPENDIX E

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

Please note, your information will **not** be sold or given to outside entities. It is for

internal use to the research study only.)

1. Name: _____

2. Grade Classification:_____

3. E-mail Address (If available):_____

4. Age:_____

5. City/Town:_____

6. Ethnic/Racial Identity: _____

7. Gender: _____

8. List all clubs, organizations, and sports you participate in at school

9. List all clubs, organizations, and sports, you participate in outside of school

*To be used only if participants are recent graduates

10. Please identify your intent **(Check all that apply)**

- Complete my high school education ( )

- Go to college ( )

- Attend Technical School ( )

- Work ( ), Full-time ( ); Part-time ( )

- Enter Military ( )

- Other, Specify ( )

APPENDIX F

WHERE I'M
FROM

I am from clothespins,

from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride.

I am from the dirt under the back porch.

(Black, glistening,

it tasted like beets.)

I am from the forsythia bush

the Dutch elm

whose long-gone limbs I remember

as if they were my own.

I'm from fudge and eyeglasses,

from Imogene and Alafair.

I'm from the know-it-alls

and the pass-it-ons,

from Perk up! and Pipe down!

I'm from He restoreth my soul

with a cottonball lamb

and ten verses I can say myself.

— George Ella Lyon

Retrieved from author's website:

http://www.georgeellalyon.com/where.html

APPENDIX G

STUDY CRITERION AND CLARIFICATIONS

Table A.1

Study Criterion and Classifications

Criterion	Clarification
This study will investigate the phenomenon in context—and will study this context in detail	• Setting: LCAS • Descriptive, single case study design. • African American male student perspectives about their experiences on paths to graduation in alternative schools. • Experiences of students completing an alternative school while specifically gaining their perceptions of the approaches that are aiding/aided them to successfully graduate. • Thick Description of understanding current phenomena and other circumstances—affects the experiences of this person.
1. How do African American male students describe their perspectives on their placements? 2. How do African American male students describe their paths to graduation, including defining moments? 3. What and who do African American male students identify as important in order to succeed in the alternative school? 4. What resources to students identify as important?	**Propositions/Arguments** 1. Intent on shaping design 2. Connections to which people to interview 3. Streamline of specific questions to ask 4. Careful consideration of learning environment and behaviors—prioritizing data