CALIFORNIA UNIVERSITY STATE NORTHRIDGE

PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL EXPERIENCES AND BELONGING AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL MALE STUDENTS

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements

For the degree of Doctor of Education

By

LaSonja S. Brown

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The Dissertation of LaSonja Brown is approved.
Dedication

To my sons, my very first students, Derrick and Alonzo Temple: You were my motivation to become an exceptional educator; I wanted to give you my very best. My best required a lot of sacrifice and more education, but your present and future needs served as additional motivation and inspiration. I love you both and am proud to be your mom. I expect great things from you because you are most capable. I look forward to watching both of you discover your academic potential and find “your” place.

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ABSTRACT

HOW DO AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES PERCEIVE AND EXPERIENCE SCHOOL BELONGING IN A SUBURBAN HIGH SCHOOL? HOW DOES THEIR PERCEPTIONS INFLUENCE ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT?

By

LaSonja S. Brown

Doctorate in Educational Leadership

No Child Left Behind has created federal and state accountabilities for districts and schools in an effort to increase student achievement. As a result, teachers have to meet particular criteria to be identified as "high qualified". Although the testing data is disaggregated by ethnicity and there are penalties involved for schools and districts for the underperformance of subgroups, the criteria to become highly qualified does not include training to address these populations, particularly African American students. The achievement gap that exists between African Americans and other subgroups is the largest. The National Assessment of Educational Progress reports that the average eighth grade student of color performs at the same level of academic proficiency as the average fourth grade White student (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2003).

The current study examined the nature of the achievement gap through interviews with nine African American high school males. The results of the study discuss how these students have perceived their educational experiences in public schools up to their junior and senior years in high school. The researcher believes that a better understanding
of school belonging for African American males would allow educators to create school improvements and reform efforts from a more informed perspective.
Chapter 1

Introduction

The significance of a sense of belonging in secondary schools has led researchers to argue that young people need schools that are communities of care and support (Hargreaves, Earl, & Ryan, 1996). When care and support are the foundations of a school community, the needs of the students will be a priority, and students will respond positively. While there are several definitions for community, for the purpose of this study, the perspective of McMillian and Chavis (1986) will be used. This perspective states there are two uses for the term community. One refers to a geographic location; the other describes the “quality of relationships.” Although a geographic location meets the definition of community, Furman (1998) notes that if members do not experience feelings of belonging, safety, and trust in others, then community is not present. The community discussed in this study is both geographically located at Temple High (pseudonym) and descriptive of the quality of relationships between African American male students and others, particularly teachers. Temple High is a suburban high school with a population of over 3,000 students. Specific demographic details will be discussed in a later section. The terms African American and Black will be used interchangeably throughout this study to describe an individual of African descent who identifies with the cultural identity of the United States.

Many low-income and minority students have not viewed the school community as a place that fosters quality relationships, but rather as a source of alienation, resistance and failure (Fine, 1987; Ford & Harris, 1999; Nieto, 1992, 1994; Sola & Bennett, 1985). Many low-income and minority students face obstacles that are beyond school influence,
however, creating a sense of community and belonging are within the realm of school control. Davidson (1996) asserts that in regards to alienation and resistance, identity is the issue. School, for many students of color, is a place where their cultural and academic identity is attacked rather than affirmed (Howard, 2003). Nevertheless, studies indicate that these students continue to need others who believe in their abilities in order to be successful learners and that they rely on teachers, counselors and other adults to reinforce their abilities (Howard, 2003). The perceptions of African American males regarding educators and school belonging can serve as valuable tools that can be utilized by educators and the students themselves to help create school communities that advocate for their optimal development.

While our nation has made progress toward social equity, it becomes clear in daily life that divisions and barriers still exist; numerous factors, which include socioeconomic status, gender, and ethnicity/race, contribute to these divisions and barriers. In the United States Supreme Court case of Brown v. Board of Education (1954), racial desegregation of public schools was mandated. Fifty years after Brown, there still appears to be a difference in the experience of students based on race. For example, many minority students are tracked into lower level courses and do not have access to more rigorous courses. In addition to not having access, their lower-performing classes do not prepare them academically for more rigorous courses. The literature on school desegregation clearly documents the fact that many African American students are not provided a quality education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003; Educational Trust, 2003). For instance, although fifty years have passed, African American male students have caught the attention of educational leaders as well as
President Obama’s federal educational reform program, *A Race to the Top*. African American males are dropping out of school at alarming rates and also experiencing high levels of incarceration in state and federal prisons.

This study will contribute to the existing body of literature by furthering an understanding and knowledge about how African American males cope with and respond to the cultural environment of their school. By understanding the school experiences and attitudes that influence how these students perceive their schooling and academic pursuits, schools can create communities that will actively seek to eliminate barriers to school belonging. This understanding can also assist educators with examining their personal biases and perceptions of African Americans, particularly males, and prioritizing caring relationships with these students in order to positively influence their academic engagement. This study will make suggestions that may serve as engagement tools for African American male students as well as research based professional development topics for educators. The purpose of the study was to bring more understanding, sensitivity, and solutions to the academic performance of African American high school males. This study will also seek to explore the role of institutional factors in creating barriers to school belonging, from the perspective of African American male high school students. In addition, this study will seek to understand the influence of school belonging on academic engagement of African American male students with their respective school community.

**Problem in Context**

Meeting the needs of all students is now the stated goal of the United States public school system as evidenced through policies such as the 2001 No Child Left
Behind (NCLB) Act. This federal law focuses on narrowing the achievement gap between races and holding schools accountable for reaching adequate yearly progress (AYP) in student achievement. NCLB requires that states monitor the performance of racial and economic subgroups and hold failing schools accountable. As a result, increased attention has been given to the disparity in academic achievement between Black students and other subgroups. No longer can race, language, or culture be used as an excuse for the academic failure of students; schools are now required to produce evidence, for the first time in the nation’s history, that students are learning (Conchas, 2003).

African American students have lower enrollment and academic performance than White students (Bailey, Jenkins, & Leinback, 2005; Cook & Cordova, 2006; Price, 2004). Although NCLB has assisted in highlighting the critical academic state of the African American student, the gap has actually widened in the past years, and African American students account for 14.7% of all dropouts; this is nearly twice the rate of White students (United States Department of Education, 2006). According to the California 2006 Standardized Testing and Reporting Program, about 60 percent of White students scored at proficient or above in English – language arts compared to only 29 percent of African American students. Similarly, in mathematics, about 53 percent of White students scored proficient or above, compared to only 24 percent of African American students (California Standardized Testing and Reporting Program, 2006).

Not only are African American students achieving at lower levels than White students, but the African American male is also achieving at a much lower level than the African American female (Conchas, 2003; Holzman, 2006). According to Holzman
(2006), this within-racial group gender gap is the widest gender gap of any student demographic group. African American male academic identities and school performances are well documented; however, there are factors that are instrumentally forming their identities that require closer examination.

School performance of African American males in particular shows great disparity when compared to other student populations (Education Trust, 2003; Holzman, 2006). National data show that there is a significant difference between African American males and White students in the areas of high school graduation rates as well as college attendance and completion rates, none of which favor African American males (United States Department of Education, 2006). African American males are more likely than White students to be placed in the lowest academic track, to be disciplined in higher numbers, and to be negatively stereotyped by teachers (Conchas, 2003; Holzman, 2006). This group is over-represented in special education programs and represents the highest percentages of suspensions and expulsions (Gardner & Talbert-Johnson, 2000; Lee, Winfield, & Wilson, 1991; U.S. Office of Civil Rights, 2002).

**Definition of Terms**

*Academic Engagement:* To be actively engaged and on task during a lesson and other instructional activities.

*API (Academic Performance Index):* A number on a scale of 200 to 1000 that indicates how well a school and district performed based on the number and percentage of students in a school and district that score in each proficiency level on the California Standardized
Testing and Reporting (STAR) exam in the previous year. The school site has its own API and the district has an API as well. The API measures a school's change in test achievement and progress toward a target API of 800. For schools and districts with scores over 650, growth is demonstrated by a minimum growth of one point in API between 2008-2009. The Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) growth is based on school-wide student proficiency levels in math and language arts, as well as percentage of proficient students in statistically significant subgroups. The API ranks school performance, sets growth targets, and provides similar-school comparisons. The API is also one component of federal accountability for school districts as measured by Adequately Yearly Progress (AYP).

**AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress):** A Statewide accountability system for public school districts receiving Title I funding in California. The goal of AYP for schools that receive Title I funding is that all students be proficient in mathematics and language arts on the STAR exam by 2014.

**CAHSEE (California High School Exit Examination):** A requirement for high school graduation in the state of California, created by the California Department of Education, to serve as a benchmark for the improvement of academic performance of California high school students.

**Cultural Relevance**

**STAR (California Standardized Testing and Reporting):** A series of tests that measure student ability in math and language arts for grades 2-11 as well as history and science in particular grades. The STAR Program is the cornerstone of the California Public Schools Accountability Act of 1999 (PSAA). The primary goal of the PSAA is to help schools
improve the academic achievement of all students. Each spring, students take a series of
tests that measure and report, in terms of their proficiency levels, as well as provide a
scale score in each subject tested. The proficiency levels of the test are: far below basic,
below basic, basic, proficient, and advanced. In addition to individual scores, school and
district performance levels are calculated using a set formula. The number that is
produced from the formula is known as the Academic Performance Index (API).

State Ranking: A school’s individual position on a state scale that is calculated separately
by school type (e.g., elementary, middle or high school). A school’s API is compared to
all other schools in the state of the same type.

Similar School Ranking: A school’s ranking that is calculated separately by school type,
(elementary, middle or high school). A school’s API is compared to 100 other schools
that have similar opportunities and challenges.

NCLB (No Child Left Behind): A federal law passed under the George W. Bush
administration. NCLB represents legislation that attempts to accomplish standards-based
education reform. The law reauthorized federal programs meant to hold primary and
secondary schools measurably accountable to higher standards in math and reading by the
year 2014.

Purpose and Significance

African American males are experiencing a persistent crisis, as they are
experiencing lower educational attainment than any other gender-race group (Bateman &
Kennedy, 1997). It is necessary to understand what this group perceives as barriers
bridges and connectors to school belonging. Being African American and male creates a
different set of dynamics; the combination of race and gender seems to constitute a
“double jeopardy,” which Furlow, McMahon, & Uway (2008) argue creates further barriers to the success of African American males (p.33). According to Education Trust (2005), there have been reform initiatives targeting African American males, but there is little evidence that the interventions have resulted in increased academic achievement. Taylor (1994) suggests that interventions targeting academic achievement of African American males often focus on scholastic and cognitive variables, even though previous models for understanding African American males’ academic struggles indicate the importance of psychological aspects along with school culture. These limited interventions would partly explain why the suspension and expulsion rates for this group are higher than other student population groups (Harry, Kingner, & Moore, 2000).

The purpose of this study is to identify the factors that contribute to the sense of school belonging experienced by African American males and how belonging influences their academic engagement. Understanding some of the barriers to academic engagement can assist educators with creating effective and appropriate strategies to facilitate a sense of belonging with the teacher, classroom and school community for African American male students. When schools are developed with the purpose of providing these very students the opportunity to think about, discuss, and identify educational barriers, the students themselves may be better able to identify areas that they can mediate and be more willing to seek outside help when the solutions cannot be provided by the institution.

This study attempts to contribute to educators’ knowledge base and practice by exploring the experiences of African American male high school students while also examining the effects of school culture as it relates to their academic engagement. This
study also examines the effect of teacher-student relationships on African American male high school students’ sense of school belonging and how these relationships influence students’ academic engagement. The intent of this study is to motivate educators to meet the educational needs of African American male high school students as well as prepare competent, confident, and academically competitive students who will be better prepared to improve not only the quality of their academic careers but also the quality of their lives.

**Research Questions**

The main research questions of this study are: How do African American male students experience and perceive their sense of school belonging in a suburban high school? How does the sense of belonging among African American male students influence their academic engagement?

Sub questions of this study are:

- What do they perceive as institutional barriers?
- How do they respond to perceived barriers?
- How does their classroom participation (academic engagement) reflect their perceptions?

**Overview of Methodology**

In qualitative research, the focus is on a deep understanding of the occurrence under study and in an effort to facilitate in-depth research; data are usually gathered from a few participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). The qualitative research tradition that best serves this study is the case study approach. This qualitative case study borrows principles from a phenomenological approach. This philosophical
orientation “focuses on people’s experiences from their perspective” (Roberts, 2004, p.111). Rossman and Rallis (2003) state one of the advantages of qualitative studies is there is a deeper understanding of the occurrence being studied that is not achievable with a large sample. Rossman and Rallis (2003) further note that breadth is gained when information is gathered from a large number of sources, while depth is gained when the focus is on a smaller number of sources. Qualitative research seeks to answer real world questions in an effort to make social conditions better (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). The ecological paradigm suggests that an individual’s behavior is influenced and affected by a “social context” (Grbich, 2007, p.36). Some portions of this study incorporate ethnography. “The defining characteristic of ethnography is that it is orientated toward the description and interpretation of cultural behaviors” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.12).

This study will describe and interpret how African American male students experience and perceive their sense of school belonging and how their perceptions influence their academic engagement in high school. The purpose is to describe the perceptions of Africa American male students in this particular school, “what they ordinarily do, and the meaning they ascribe to what they do under ordinary or particular circumstances, and present this description in a manner that draws attention to regularities that implicate cultural process” (Wolcott, 1996. p. 68).

The main method of data collection for this study was in-depth interviews with African American male students. These interviews were conducted with students who attended a suburban public high school located in Southern California. Student interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed in order to determine veins of similarity among the experiences of different African American male students within Temple High
School. Attention was given to the sense of belonging the students felt to their school and how their academic engagement was affected.

The data collection methods were 1) interview and 2) document review. According to Bloomberg & Volpe (2008), interviews allow the researcher to elicit "rich, thick descriptions" and to clarify statements and probe for further information (p. 12). The document reviews included transcripts, test history, and discipline files that provided additional background information and concrete evidence that further illuminated the students’ perceptions as exposed in their interviews.

**Interviews**

Nine students were interviewed. The questions for student interviews (Appendix A) focused on students’ experiences inside and outside of class, their perceptions of belonging, their attitudes regarding their relationships with teachers, their perceptions of the importance of education, and their perceptions of their classroom involvement.

**Document Review**

Document review was the last piece for analysis. Documents collected for this study include transcripts, California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) data, STAR data, and current class schedules. Test scores were examined to determine if a relationship existed between the students’ scores and their perceptions of their academic status as described in their interviews. In the interviews, students were asked if their scores (in their opinion) are a reflection of their academic ability. The value they placed on testing and their understanding of the academic implications of the results was the goal of that question. Transcripts were viewed in order to provide researcher with information regarding student courses as well as a pattern of academic tracking into
lower level courses as the literature suggests happens often. A comparison was made between grades in the class of favorite teacher and other teachers, particularly subject-alike.

For the purposes of this study, Temple High School will be the research site. It is located in the northwestern region of California within the Temple High School District (THSD) in Ventura County. It serves grades nine through twelve and follows a traditional calendar. It is one of five comprehensive high schools in Temple High School District. Ninety-four percent of the teaching staff is credentialed (119 of 126 teachers have their full teaching credentials). The API (annual performance index) State Rank for this school is 3 and the API State Rank for similar schools is 1 (on a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being the highest). In the 2008-2009 school year, Temple High School had an enrollment of 3,231 students, of which 1,895 (59.05%) were classified as truants, which means they have had multiple absences in a school year. During this same school year, 17 of the 26 expulsions were for violence and/or drug infractions, and 221 of 601 suspensions were also due to violence and/or drugs.

Demographic and Institutional Characteristics

Temple High serves a diverse population of students. During the 2008-09 school year, the student enrollment was 3,231. The demographic breakdown of the staff was 0.7% American Indian, 1.6% Asian, 22.2% Hispanic, 73% White, 2.4% African American, 0.8% multicultural or no response. The student demographic was as follows: 70% Hispanic, 15% White, 5% Black, 4% multiple or no responses, 3% Filipino, 2% Asian, less than 1% American Indian or Alaskan, and less than 1% Pacific Islander. The
English Learner population was 16% and the annual dropout rate is 1%. There were slightly more males (51%) than females (49%). There were 126 teachers and the student to teacher ratio was 26:1. Temple High had an API of 712 for 2009 but did not meet the AYP (annual yearly progress) criteria. According to the California Department of Education’s website, 7% of Temple High’s students were in special education, 13.2% were identified for migrant education services, 16% qualify for English Language Learner support, and 33% qualified for free or reduced price lunch.

**Historical Development of Study Site**

This site was erected in 1902 and has a rich history. The first class began in 1902 with 41 students, one principal, and two teachers. The courses offered were Latin, English, History and Math. Now, it is one of five comprehensive high schools in Temple High School District. This new state of the art campus opened on September 5, 1995.

**Site Sampling Strategy**

This study’s site sampling strategy was criterion-based. Miles (1994) defines criterion-based sampling as all cases that meet some criterion, useful for quality assurance. It was appropriate for site selection because this research study and focus requires a high school with a significant number of African American males in the population; it was also appropriate for this sample selection because this research focus was on the perceptions of African American male students, thus the primary participants were Black students. When considering a potential site, one of the criteria had to be that it not only be a public high school but also be a school with an African American population that was at least close to 5% (in order to have a significant number of African American males to select). A high school with any special enrollment requirements, such
as tuition or entrance exams, would provide a different population of African American male students thus their experiences would be different from the students attending a public school that is considered their boundary school.

I was granted permission to do research on this campus. I obtained approval for the study after meeting with the superintendent of Temple School District and the principal of Temple High School. I had a connection here as a former parent, former summer school teacher, and former summer school administrator. This connection did not have any bearing on the study, as my interactions with the staff were limited to the principal, one teacher, and the career specialist. The principal was also in a doctoral program and was empathetic. As a result, access to campus and other staff was made available in a timely manner. The principal viewed me as an insider since both were working on doctorates and fellow administrators. Fortunately, neither the students nor the two other staff members were defensive of their school culture and learning community. This was helped by the fact that I maintained rapport with the principal and designated staff members. I visited the principal after each visit in order to provide an opportunity for questions and to express my gratitude.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

I am certain that my race had an effect on the study. Because I shared the race of the group that was studied, this commonality may have been an influential component. I was not aware of any direct influence. I believed that the commonality of race served as a positive as it may have created a level of comfort with the participants. On the other hand, it may have prevented the participants from answering some of the questions that required vulnerability. Communicating with designated staff members provided me
opportunities to explain that the study was focused on the students and their perceptions of school belonging and not on the quality of the staff’s services to this particular group of students.

Some of the students’ affective filters may have been automatically lowered because we shared the same race, and some students may have been more transparent, thereby providing valuable information. I believe there was a level of comfort during the interviews that may have been a bi-product of sharing the same race and culture. At the same time, sharing the same race as the student participants may have worked as a barrier, especially if the students attempted to tell me what they thought they should think or feel. Nevertheless, access to homes was immediately granted for interviews once the parents spoke with me by phone.

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter One is intended to give the reader an introduction to the dissertation by providing insight to the research. In addition to an introduction, chapter one provided the background of the study, the problem statement, the research questions, the significance of the study, and overview of the methodology and definition of terms.

Chapter Two of this dissertation includes an extensive review of the literature as it pertains to school belonging and academic engagement of African American males. The primary focus of this section is how a sense of school belonging encourages or prohibits academic engagement.

Chapter Three includes a discussion of the methodology used in this study. This chapter of the dissertation describes the participants as well as details the methods by
which the participants were selected, the demographics of the site, and types of methods and data collected.

Chapter Four organizes the findings of the study and presents academic and narrative profiles of each participant.

Chapter Five of this dissertation includes a discussion of results. The discussion includes the perceptions of African American males regarding school belonging and academic engagement and inferences that can be drawn from the results of this study that seem consistent with the literature review. This section discusses how the findings can add to the limited body of research on the organizational barriers that contribute to the underperformance of African American males. Finally, considerations for further study and institutional suggestions for schools serving this particular race and gender are included.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

In this chapter, I reviewed relevant research relating to school belonging and related factors that contribute to the high school experience of African American males. All of the variables have their own unique impact on school belonging and academic engagement regarding African American males. The terms African American and Black are used interchangeably throughout this study to describe an individual of African descent who identifies with the cultural identity of the United States.

The troubled status of African American males in school and social life has been documented in several studies. In school, African Americans account for 32% of suspensions and 30% of all expulsions, yet they only represent 17% of the total school population (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2000). When compared to their White counterparts, African American male adolescents are placed in remedial or special education classes at a rate three times higher (Advancement Project/Civil Rights Project, 2000; Allen-Meares, 1999; Lee, 1996; Trescott, 1990). However, only 8.4% are identified and enrolled in gifted and talented classes (Ford, Grantham & Bailey, 1999; George, 1993; Trescott, 1990). Schools are sending a message to and about African American males; this message does not say that they are valuable and intellectually capable of academic success. Furthermore, the African American male has a one in four chance of becoming a dropout statistic from high school and has an even worse one in 12 chance of graduating from college (Trescott, 1990). African American males account for 3.5% of the total college and university enrollment in the United States (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1998). This statistic is alarming. There are more severe consequences of
unequal education today because of the strong link between education and income (Orfield, 2001). For example, some of the severe consequences are an increase in dropout rates, unemployment and incarceration, while college enrollment decreases. The ability for these students to positively contribute to society is critically affected. Orfield (2001) argues their economic future depends on their secondary and post secondary schooling. African American males need an adequate education not only to have successful school experiences but also to have productive lives. Not only do the students experience an unequal education that excludes them from the most rigorous curriculum available and all of the benefits of intellectual development, but Black males also have a dim future outside of school as a result of the quality of their education. African American males’ social experiences are just as dangerous and troubling as their school experiences. They lead the nation as both victims and perpetrators in homicides (Skolnick & Currie, 1994), they comprise the fastest growing suicide rate (National Research Council, 1989; Poussaint & Alexander, 2000), and they are contracting HIV and AIDS at a faster rate than any other group (Auerbach, Krimgold, & Lefkowitz, 2000; Centers for Disease Control, 1988; Kaplan, Johnson, Bailey, & Simon, 1987). The declining enrollment of Black males in higher education, the declining number of Black males who are gainfully employed, and the increasing number of Black males who are at risk of failing school (often leading to increasing numbers in the criminal justice system) has led several authors to refer to the Black male as an “endangered species” (Gibbs, 1988; Hare, 1987; Hare & Castenell, 1985). African American males are plagued with a plethora of challenges, some of which are not associated with the educational system. Many Blacks and Latinos for example, “are poorly educated, live around a higher concentration of
demoralized people in dilapidated and dangerous circumstances and have few prospects for employment” (Young, 2000, p. 97). Therefore, their educational performance is connected to the hardships they endure within the larger society (Coleman et al., 1966). The aforementioned factors are obviously out of the realm of school influence; however, schools could increase their efforts in meeting minority students’ psychological and emotional need to belong, particularly when it comes to African American males. Meeting the need to belong will assist schools with meeting additional educational needs. For instance, when students feel that they belong, there is a stronger possibility for caring relationships to develop. However, this study does not attempt to address the many factors outside of schools that contribute to the disparities in academic achievement of African American males. Instead, it will focus on the variables that educators can influence.

According to some researchers, school failure contributes to many negative outcomes for African American males (Ford & Harris, 1993; Kunjufu, 1986). For example, many students create discipline issues in class to avoid the embarrassment of not understanding the material. Other students lose their academic confidence and give up altogether as a result of school failure. Sometimes drugs and alcohol indulging are by-products of school failure. Creating a culture that is caring, intentionally inclusive and culturally competent can help decrease school failure for many students.

California State Test (CST) scores reveal an achievement gap for African American students. Conversely, Graham and Long (1986) and Graham (1994) found that the achievement motivation between African Americans and Caucasians are similar in regards to sense of competence and other measurable variables, such as expectancies for
success, patterns for attribution for success and failure, and locus of control. The question that educators need to ask is, “Why are African American males underachieving?”

In the school, the primary members of the community are teachers and students (Osterman, 2000). The dynamics between these two groups highly influence the level of teaching and learning that occurs. Osterman (2000) argues that the responsibility of creating the sense of community in schools belongs to the teachers and schools. Unfortunately, organizational policies and practices exist that are not only barriers to creating a community but also systematically contribute to experiences of isolation, alienation and marginalization of students (Booker, 2006; Carter, 2005). For example, many schools have academic pre-requisites for advanced courses; the prerequisites are not always ability-based, oftentimes, they are performance-based. If, for example, a student does not have good grades (particularly A’s and B’s), they are not even considered for more rigorous courses, even if they may have the ability or interest. When Black students notice that there are few or no Black students in the more challenging classes, a message is sent and this message does not foster a sense of community or school belonging.

Some researchers use the terms belonging and relatedness interchangeably. They define relatedness as a basic psychological need that is required for human growth and development (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Deci, Vallerand, Pellitier, & Ryan, 1992; Rayan, 1995). In other words, when students do not feel connected to their school and do not feel valued by their teachers, they are being asked to perform cognitive tasks when their basic psychological needs have gone unmet. Osterman (2000) found this expectation to perform cognitive tasks under such conditions to be a symptom of schools
that value achievement and mastery above the sense of belonging. Schools that fit this
description do not understand that belonging is a “precondition for engagement” (Ryan,
1995). Ryan (1995) also argues that the psychological development of students is
affected when this need is unmet, along with their overall well-being, even when they are
unaware. Impaired development, a decrease in motivation, poor performance, and
alienation are predicted when psychological and emotional needs of student are not
satisfied in educational settings (Deci et al., 1991). It is counter-productive to address
psychological and emotional needs with academic solutions. While it is in the best
interest of all students to address academic needs and for all to experience academic
achievement, it is imperative that schools address the cause of disengagement and
recognize that oftentimes it is a symptom of a greater problem. The achievement gap
could be a bi-product of students’ lack of belonging. For the purpose of this study,
school belonging is referring to an individual’s view of whether s/he feels a part of,
accepted and valued by, included in, and connected to the school community and culture.

In search of further empirical evidence to conclude the need to belong is a
fundamental psychological need. Baumeister and Leary (1995) conducted an extensive
literature review and found that “belonging serves as a fundamental motivation, should
apply to all people, operate in a wide variety of settings and affect emotional and
cognitive patterns” (p. 497). They also noted that pathological and long-lasting
consequences would be the product when the need is not satisfied. Furthermore, studies
indicate that the levels of intrinsic motivation, self-esteem and identity integration of
students are influenced by their perceptions of support from adults in schools (Ryan,
and intrinsic motivation and the findings indicated that the greatest decline occurred when the experimenter was present but avoided involvement with the child. They designed another study and modified the experimenter’s involvement; the greatest decline again was when the experimenter was present but ignored the child. One of the conclusions from Anderson, Manoogian and Reznick (1976), is that teachers could be teaching but be uninvolved with their students. The existence of teachers’ relational disconnect from their students exemplifies a barrier to school belonging (Anderson, Manoogian & Reznick, 1976). When there is no involvement from the teacher with the student, the presence alone of the teacher is not beneficial to the student. Conversely, teachers should be intentional about developing caring relationships with African American male students. Although the research of Manoogian and Reznick (1976) focused on a diverse population of students, it can be extended to African American males. Caring, purposeful interactions should take place on consistent bases in order for students to feel a part of, valued by, or connected to teachers, thus creating a stronger sense of school belonging.

Research focusing on school belonging has almost exclusively examined the effects of school belonging and academic performance of middle school students (Goodenow, 1993; Roeser, Midgely, & Urdan, 1996; Ryan & Patrick, 2001; Wentzel, 1997). Unfortunately, there is limited research on school belonging in high schools (Booker, 2006). The research that has been conducted on high schools has primarily focused on students dropping out and student engagement (Finn, 1989; Wehlage, 1989). Most of the research on academic achievement of African American students is quantitative in nature (Goodenow, 1993; Hagborg, 1994; Voelkl, 1995), using statistical
measures, and in this research a significant relationship between achievement and engagement has been found.

**Labeling and Limiting African American Males**

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 brought attention to the academic crisis that is being experienced nationwide. No Child Left Behind is a recent school reform initiative that has targeted the underachievement of lower-performing groups, including African American males. Interestingly, the gap between White and minority students is minimal or nonexistent at the beginning of their schooling; however, by sixth grade this gap has increased by as much as two grade levels (Alexander & Entwhistle, 1988; Valencia, 1991, 1997). As a result, the high school students that state and federal legislation have identified as at-risk have not shown signs of increased achievement despite mandated educational interventions (Education Trust, 2003; U. S. Department of Education, 2001). As a result of ineffective interventions, the two-year gap between minority and White students, remain and oftentimes, this gap increases. Also, curriculum reform efforts that are implemented in many schools are not effective; they are designed to fix the deficiencies of African American male students (Ogbu, 1978). It is no surprise that students are not responding positively to a curriculum that frames their school failure in terms of something is wrong with them, while neglecting to investigate how the organization may have failed the students. Conversely, Duncan (2002) found that oftentimes these programs could further marginalize African American males. For example, there is a stigma attached to after school tutoring, which is often the method of support offered to at-risk students. While other students are involved in extracurricular activities after school, at-risk students are expected to participate in academic
interventions. The pull out program has been ineffective as well. These programs are often ineffective because the students are pulled out of their regularly scheduled class resulting in a form of disruption, peers are aware of the purpose, and the students are often reluctant to participate because of the perceived negative status that other students have of students who receive remediation (Duncan, 2002).

Labeling students at-risk learners and special needs students has a negative connotation that is reflective of the student’s lack of academic ability. Labeling students at-risk and special needs has been the justification given for tracking many African American males into lower academic and special education classes (Harry & Anderson, 1999; Oakes, Ormseth, Bell, & Camp, 1990). The use of tracking at-risk students does not promote a sense of school belonging for African American males. Instead tracking creates student isolation and a stronger resistance to the academic goals of the school (Kagan, 1990). The at-risk label, though not physically visible, is apparent to many. The student may not be able to articulate this designation; however, the classroom environment, low level of rigor in the curriculum, and the stigma among peers are constant reminders that they are at-risk. When interventions are developed through a deficiency perspective, it is possible that educators lower their achievement and behavioral expectations for minority students, particularly, African American males.

Taylor (1991) asserts that despite the previous models, which indicate the importance of addressing psychological and environmental struggles of African American males, interventions that focus on this group continue to identify scholastic and cognitive variables related to educational successes. Drawing from Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, it is not as effective to target scholastic goals without addressing and meeting
the basic needs of students, such as the need to belong. Consequently, when students do not believe they are valued or connected to a school community, which is a basic need, they are being asked to academically succeed after periods of neglect (Taylor, 1991). Thus, more research regarding the non-academic aspects of education, such as school belonging, should be conducted as to how it contributes to academic achievement of minority students, particularly African American males.

**Relationship Between Belonging and Academic Achievement**

The construct of belonging derived from Maslow’s (1971) hierarchal theory of motivation and personality is based on the pyramid of basic human needs (Booker, 2007). According to this pyramid, one can move to the next step of self-actualization once needs are satisfied at each level (Booker, 2007). Booker (2007) reveals that Maslow’s theory is similar to other theories of development in that resolution is contingent on completion of the previous stage. During adolescence, having a strong sense of belonging or connection is extremely important (Newton & Newton, 2001). Generally, when this need is met, academic performance is increased, teacher-student interactions are more positive, and peer relations are more satisfying (Booker, 2007). With this in mind, the policies and practices of schools that serve adolescents should reflect a priority placed on belonging and connections. In contrast, alienation occurs when there is a lack of belonging or connection. Goodenow (1993) notes when a school has a large percentage of a particular ethnic group, the group that will feel a diminished sense of belonging to the greater school community will be the students in the minority group. Students’ sense of belonging can be negatively influenced when they perceive themselves to be exceptionally different from the rest of the school (Goodenow, 1993; Hemmings, 1996;
When schools are aware of these dynamics, appropriate and effective measures can be taken to mediate some of the negative effects. One precursor for dropping out is a lack of belonging with the greater school community (Booker, 2007). Within the context of the current study, minority status is particularly important because the participants, high school-aged Black males, represent less than five percent of the school population and possibly could be subject to the same feelings of social marginalization and non-belonging.

Several definitions have been used in regards to belonging (Booker, 2006). Goodenow (1992) defines school belonging as the extent to which students feel they are welcomed, respected and a valued member of the school community. Similarly, other researchers indicate that student learning, motivation, and engagement are maximized when the need to be connected to others is met (Becker & Luthar, 2003; Dewey, 1958; Fredriks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Noddings, 1992; Osterman, 2000). Students, who earn high grades, exhibit academic motivation, and their high school completion rates have been associated with a strong sense of belonging (Finn, 1989; Goodenow, 1992; Osterman, 2000). Eccles & Midgley (1989) argue that support from encouraging adult mentors (teachers, counselors, and coaches) have positive effects on school attendance, college attendance, and educational aspirations; however, this support often declines as students reach adolescence. As a matter of fact, students who feel alienated often exhibit negative behaviors such as cutting class, hostile behavior, and dropping out (Ford & Harris, 1993). Poor psychological adjustment, alienation, anxiety, depression and loneliness are all related to a lack of belongingness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Chipuer, 2001). The symptoms described above oftentimes lead to negative educational outcomes.
and unfortunately, academic performance is viewed as being synonymous with academic ability.

Negative educational outcomes are not always a result of a lack of intellect or academic ability. Black students with above-average intelligence have been reported as dropouts (Felice, 1981; Richardson & Gerlach, 1980; Rumberger, 1983, 1987). Several studies indicate that various school-related variables influence students’ educational disengagement and underachievement, regardless of their academic ability (Ford & Harris, 1993). Among those variables are low values placed on academic achievement (Dweck & Elliott, 1983; Felice, 1981), the achievement ideology (Mickelson, 1990; Richardson & Gerlach, 1980), attitudes toward school (Rumberger, 1987), school and classroom climates (Fraser, 1989), and the quality of student-teacher relations (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Irvine, 1991). Pang and Sablah (1998) surveyed 100 pre-service teachers and 75 in-service teachers that were enrolled in a multicultural course to determine their feelings about teaching African American students. Sixty-five percent of in-service teachers reported a belief that African American students could not be reached even by a teacher with good teaching abilities. Furthermore, Pang and Sablah (1998) go on to reveal that the surveyed teachers held a strong belief that the African American community is not supportive of education. The teachers as a group also believed that the cultural conflict in communication, along with working class English dialect between home and school, were the main contributing factors for the underachievement of African American students. This perception, though not communicated verbally, does find a way of expression. When there is a perceived psychological disconnect between teachers, students, and peers, student academic performance suffers. An optimal learning
environment is not created when Black males are taught by teachers who believe that the African American community and culture is not supportive of, and oftentimes in conflict with the goals of education. Nevertheless, a positive teacher and student connection counters this effect (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005; Osterman, 2000; Voelkl, 1997; Wentzel, 1998). In other words, if teachers focus on building relationships with their students, their perceptions of African American community and their working English dialect will become secondary concerns at most. Therefore, a caring relationship between teachers and students is a critical factor for school belonging and academic success.

Ogbu (1988) and Connell, Spencer, & Aber, (1994) suggest that the positive, dynamic interactions between students and their social environment results in academic success for the African American male; these researchers go on to contend that African American males’ perceptions of themselves in a school context impacts their academic success. A strong sense of belonging can result in a decrease in dropout rates and increase in academic engagement (Anderman, 2002; Booker, 2004; Goodenow, 1992; Roeser, Midgley, & Udan, 1996). Therefore, educator’s consistent encouragement, coupled with effective professional development, could aide teachers in understanding how crucial their role is when educating African American students, particularly males. While several studies document the benefits of strong feelings of school belonging, Booker (2004) notes that one study investigating the level of perceptions and school belonging did not consider the correlation between school belonging and academic achievement significant. Nevertheless, much of the research on belonging suggests that strong relationships between students and teachers help students feel more connected to their schools (Booker, 2004). On this point, Maslow (1971), Booker (2006), and Glasser
(1986) consider the need to belong as a basic human need, therefore critical for development. In order for schools to meet the needs of African American males in a manner that can result in a stronger sense of belonging and academic engagement, teachers need to accept the magnitude of their role as primary facilitators of the student/teacher relationship. This paradigm shift on the part of schools could increase the opportunities of African American males at becoming academically successful and counter some of the negative elements of society, such as consistent school failure, unemployment and incarceration.

Social class and gender have played an influential role in the achievement gap. Both Ogbu (1998) and Jencks & Phillips (1998) argue that while race/ethnicity is a powerful factor in school success, social class and gender also play a significant role. For instance, even when social class differences are controlled for, African American males continue to underperform and an achievement gap continues to exist. This same group of African American males, Jencks & Phillips (1998) note, fall significantly behind their White peers in regards to both grade point average and standardized test scores. Grade point averages and standardized test scores are results of academic performance and oftentimes bi-products of school experiences (Finn, 1989). Given these findings, it appears that the intersection of race and gender significantly influences academic outcomes.

**Reframing the Achievement Gap as a Treatment Gap**

Much attention is given to the achievement gap, but a gap in the treatment of African American males also exists within schools (Brookover & Erickson, 1969; Morrow & Torres, 1995). Much of the current focus on the achievement gap frames the
problem solely as a matter of inferior performance on the part of African American students, not as a matter of inferior treatment on behalf of schools (McMillan, 2003). While there are several factors outside of school that contribute to the plight of the Black male, Kunjufu (1986) identifies the public education system as a social institution that has “flagrantly contributed” to the destruction of Black males’ aspirations (p.21).

Educators have been entrusted with the privileged task of educating all students. When schools allow a population of students to continually be underserved, namely African American males, it is an example of educational neglect (Hilliard, Perry, & Steele, 2003).

Students’ racial and socioeconomic backgrounds influence others’ perceptions of them as well as the treatment they receive from adults who work with them in schools, and there is considerable evidence to support this contention (Brookover & Erickson, 1969; Morrow & Torres, 1995). What is less understood is how the perceptions of African American males and the ways they are treated affect their academic achievements. Standardized test scores reveal that many African American male students are academically unsuccessful, and, as a result, they are not performing as well as other racial groups. It is also clear that within schools barriers exist that are influencing their academic achievement.

The condition of African American males is troubling to many; for instance, Sandler, Wilcox, & Everson (1985) mention that when Black males violate school rules or even commit minor offenses; the punishment for them is more likely to be severe. Consequently, Noguera (2003) questions why being Black and male causes this group to stand out in such “negative and alarming ways,” not only in school but also in society in general (p.17). The question of how this group developed such an alarming presence at
school can probably be answered through future empirical research. However, regardless of the source, the staff that view African American males in this light and the African American male students who are subjected to the negative views are likely to be psychologically affected. Noguera (2003) further argues that nurturing, supporting, and protecting are areas where schools that serve Black males are consistently failing.

Unfortunately, racial and socioeconomic backgrounds of students have a bearing on the way they are treated and perceived by the adults who work with them within schools (Brookover & Erickson, 1969; Morrow & Torres, 1995). Although the main goal of schools is to educate, for many students, it is difficult to learn in an unsafe environment. Black males are marginalized and stigmatized at some schools (Meier, 1989). These students may not be able to articulate their marginalized and stigmatized status, but they certainly are affected. To address the achievement gap of African American males without addressing the treatment gap, is to ask students to ignore the historical mistreatment they have received, risk more mistreatment by participating in class, seek help from an educator that may have low expectations of them, and trust that an education from this same system will somehow change the treatment they receive. African American males can benefit from appropriate, adequate and sustainable efforts to decrease the achievement gap; however, the efforts should not be random, but research-based.

Hilliard (1991) reveals that in school, Black males are more likely to be labeled as behavior problems and as less intelligent at a very young age. Black males are also more likely to be punished with severity, even for minor offenses, for violating school rules (Sandler, Wilcox, & Everson, 1985) and often without regard for their welfare. Although
minor offenses and violations of school rules may be a disruption of school activities, some negative school behaviors are reactions to the treatment African American male students receive. They often experience social oppression and racism and have adopted a “ritualized approach to masculinity,” identified within the literature as the “cool pose,” that allows them to cope and survive (Majors & Billson, 1992, p. 4). Majors and Billson (1992) describe this disposition that African American males learn to project at a young age as an emotionless facade. She goes on to explain that this facade is built up in response to the damaged pride and poor self-confidence that resulted from African American males’ membership in a subjugated group. Although this disposition appears to serve as a defense mechanism and a strategy for coping, Majors and Billson (1992), like Steele (1992), contend that “cool pose” is oppositional to academic identification (p. 24). Conversely, their method of coping increases the negative perceptions and treatment they receive. This creates a vicious cycle. Schools fail when the learning environment for Black males is consistently antagonistic, and Black males learn not to trust educators and resist what is offered by those who severely punish them. Noguera (2003) asserts that we know little about how the perceptions and treatment of African American male students affect their academic performance; nevertheless, we do know that their academic performance is lower than any other racial group. More qualitative research on the correlation between treatment and academic performance could yield more answers.

The current academic condition of Black males has been consistent and persistent. They have the most persistent low achieving academic gap among subgroups (Gibbs, 1988; Irvine, 1990; Polite & Davis, 1999). The indicators of school failures can serve as guides to assist schools in developing strategic and effective methods to serve and reach
this population of students. No longer can schools continue to frame their service to minority students, particularly Black males, in a deficit model that implies that something is wrong with the students. It is imperative that the strategies or programs created are in direct response to the students’ needs. For example, the strategy aimed at increasing school attendance cannot be an incentive program that gives rewards for simply attending school. Glasser (1986) argues that schools have consistently used externally applied stimuli and have been abysmally unsuccessful. Glasser (1986) further argues that methods to change behavior will not be effective until the need for belonging is met. Glasser (1986) contends that the student who does not have their belonging need met by the school would much rather invest their energy in fulfilling this deficiency in other places rather than learning things such as quadratic equations. The strategy for increasing school attendance and other academic goals should include elements that also increase the students’ sense of belonging. Schools must make aggressive, appropriate, and effective efforts to serve African American males, as if they really believe that no child should be left behind.

The Notion of “Acting White”

Much of the research on African American academic achievement is based on Ogbu’s work. According to Ogbu (1987), there is a tendency for Black students to resist academic success. He further argues that some Black males adopt “oppositional identities” that undermine the value they place on education (Ogbu, 1987, p.43). Black students are often labeled as “schoolboy[s]” or “schoolgirl[s]” or accused of “acting White” by their African American peers when they embrace education and attempt to be academically successful (Dietrich, 1998; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Fries-Britt, 1998;
Matute-Bianchi, 1991; Ogbu, 1992). Black students’ academic pursuits are classified by their peers as transgressions of group norms and are seen as a sign of “selling out” (Noguera, 2003, p.39). Many students respond to this peer pressure by opposing the elements that represent academic achievement, thus academic dis-identification develops or is strengthened. It is not enough for schools to develop programs, policies, and practices to counter the risks and academic outcomes experienced by African American males because they sometimes adopt behaviors, such as acting out in classrooms and avoiding academic challenges, that contribute to their failure (Noguera, 2003). Schools that intentionally facilitate and nurture community and school belonging will simultaneously address school failure of African American males.

Ogbu’s notion of acting White is challenged by other researchers. For example, Carter (2005) argues that although some African American and Latino students may use the term acting White, it is used to describe certain practices and has cultural meaning, but the term is not used for academic reasons. Furthermore, Carter (2005) refers to the Supreme Court battles of Brown v. Board of Education (1954) and Castaneda v. Pickard (1981) to illustrate the value placed on education by African American and Latino communities. Oftentimes, the behavior or lack of academic engagement of African American students is mislabeled as a rejection of school and excellence (Carter, 2005). When in actuality, academic disengagement is oftentimes a defense mechanism exhibited by African American and Latino students brought about by the schools’ view of their cultural identity as negative.

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) described acting White as a factor that prohibits African American students from academic achievement in school. In their study of one
high school, they found that African American students avoided academic success due to fears of being labeled as acting White and being ostracized by their ethnic peers. Interestingly, an early published research study use of the term acting White is cited in McCordle and Young’s (1970) research. These researchers reveal that the goals of Black students were to obtain equal rights and opportunities without acting White. Black students identified acting White as becoming more formal, inhibited, and lacking “soul” (Bergin & Cooks, 2002, p.113). Therefore, students who voiced that acting White or adopting a White disposition leads to alienation from their ethnic and racial peers were not referring to academics (Carter, 2005).

In a qualitative study of 38 relatively high-achieving African American and Mexican American students in various high schools, Bergin and Cooks (2002) state that their findings differ from Fordham and Ogba (1986). Bergin and Cooks (2002) argue that their data of the goals and achievement of African American students are more congruent with other quantitative studies (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey, 1998; Colling-Eaglin and Karbenick, 1993; Cook and Ludwig, 1998; Spencer, Noll, Stoltzful, & Harpalani, 2001) which do not consider the implications of students’ rejection of academic achievement due to their fears of being accused of acting White. In addition, Bergin and Cooks (2002) noted that they never heard a single comment from students regarding altering their behavior or earning poor grades to avoid the label of acting White.

Bergin and Cooks’ work also disregards Fordham’s (1988, 1996) Raceless Persona Theory, which suggested that African American students who experience an internal conflict as a result of their academic and school success. She goes on to indicate
that resisting and rejecting school and academic success is a normal part of the Black collective identity because its goal is to oppose the White identity. Many educators ascribe to Fordham’s 1988 theory. Fordham (1988) further argues that because African American students have a better chance of academic and school success by assimilating to the White school norm, students distance themselves from the Black collective; she calls this an act of “developing a raceless persona” (p.31). According to Fordham (1988) this was the price African American students had to pay in order to academically achieve.

Unlike Fordham, O’Connor (1997) conducted a research study with low-income, high-achieving African American high school students who experienced situations in and out of school that have been labeled as inhibitors to academic achievement. Some of these inhibitors were described as low teacher expectations, lack of positive relationships with teachers, and lack of access to more rigorous curriculum (O’Connor, 1997). Nevertheless, these students, according to O’Connor (1997), were not only high-achieving African American students but also had a positive racial identity, a high awareness of race, and an understanding of structural racism. O’Connor’s (1997) study challenges Ogbu’s (1992) Acting White Theory. Similarly, Bergin and Cooks (2000) found that students in a predominantly Black inner city high school were academically competitive and thought that excelling academically was beneficial. Unlike the students, who acted like class clowns and displayed other behaviors that were oppositional to academic achievement, who Ogbu (1992) mentioned, Bergin and Cooks (2002) found that the students they studied did not earn poor grades or reduce their efforts to avoid acting White. Bergin and Cooks (2002) argued that they believed harassment about acting White occurred when African American students showed preference for Whiteness.
embodied in dress and speech rather than in school or academic success. Oppositional peer culture is displayed in day-to-day experiences and is related to the way students present themselves in relation to the music, language, and attire of the dominant group, rather than academic achievement (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998, 2002; Carter, 1999, 2005; Tyson, Darity, Castellino & Domini, 2005).

**Identification with Academics**

Identification with academics is a prerequisite for learning (Felice, 1981; Newman, 1981). Ogbu (1992) classifies minorities into two groups: (a) voluntary groups who reside in a country or society voluntarily and (b) involuntary groups who were brought into the country or society against their will. Ogbu (1987) further categorizes the involuntary group into the immigrant and the caste-like. He argues that because the social realities and perspectives of the above two groups are so different, the outcomes they experience are vastly different. In other words, immigrant minorities, such as Asians, have positive feelings regarding school, viewing it as an avenue to create a better future for them, and they also experience a greater degree of academic success than caste-like minorities such as African Americans. Some African Americans, according to Ogbu (1987), view schools as part of a system that is not only oppressive to them but also their ancestors. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) state that this group does not associate school as an appropriate identification for African Americans because they want to avoid the “burden of acting White” (p.53). Ogbu (1987) refers to this response as *Cultural Inversion*. Ogbu (1987) suggests that it is the students’ own perspectives that create the outcome of being labeled as *White* and that these students succumb to peer pressure not to do well in schools.
Ogbu’s work is important because he developed the idea that African American students reject school as a White domain and high academic achievement as being incongruent with their racial and ethnic identities (Carter, 2005). Ogbu’s research is frequently cited in educational literature because his theory of oppositional identity seems to be accepted by many educators as an explanation why African American males are the lowest achieving educational sub-group. In addition, in his theory of Cultural Inversion, Obgu (1987) posits that Black males are threatened by education as an aspect of the dominant culture and thus choose to devalue traditional aspects of society, including education, to create a sense of self-worth on their own terms and thus preserve their cultural/racial integrity (Hilliard, Perry, Steele, 2003). Ogbu’s theory ignores the barriers that exist in schools for Black males, exempts schools from being responsible for educating all students, and implies that Black students are destined to academic failure due to their negative views on education. Ogbu’s (1987) theory regarding the lack of academic success of involuntary minorities, however, neither reflects the history of African Americans’ slave narratives nor the rich history of the struggles of people of color to overcome educational racial barriers. There is a history of celebrations and triumphs of past generations of African Americans (Hilliard, Perry, Steele, 2003).

Steele (2003) found that immigrant minorities have a different perspective about the racism they may face; they conclude that it is temporary and that their individual effort of endurance and education will lead to a better life. In contrast, caste-like minorities, have lived here for generations, have history in this country and understand that oftentimes the treatment is not temporary, that education does not always lead to an improved quality of life and better paying jobs for members of their group (Hilliard,
Immigrant minorities, such as the Chinese, not only possess a hope for a better future but also retain the possibility of returning to their home of origin (Hilliard, Perry & Steele, 2003). Contrary to Ogbu (1987), Steele (2003) asserts that perspective alone does not equal positive educational outcomes. Rather, it is the experience of individuals and educational support, coupled with hope that can make the difference for African American males (i.e., caste-like minorities).

Ogbu (1987) suggests that if voluntary minorities are achieving academically, then the school is offering these same opportunities to all students. Yet, the academic success of one group does not mean that the school does not have barriers preventing the academic success of another group (Hilliard, Perry, Steele, 2003). In other words, if Asian American students are able to be academically successful, it does not mean that the school does not have systemic barriers to academic achievement for African American male students.

**Encouraging Athletics at the Expense of Academics**

School experiences influence academic identities; where racial patterns of achievements are consistent, students and teachers are more likely to see academic performance as a direct result of racial identity (Meier, Stewart, & England, 1989; Noguera, 2001). It is critical to recognize the role that teacher perceptions and expectations play in the formations of these identities, especially in adolescence. The quality of relationships that students have with their teachers in specific classes, directly affects how students feel about school, their coursework, and their academic identities (Osterman, 2000). As a result, many African American males focus on other strengths and create nonacademic goals that appear more attainable such as sports and music.
Oftentimes, these goals are met with school support. Although not explicitly stated, the implicit message is clear that Black males are encouraged to excel in athletics and many times are not encouraged to excel in academic subjects (Majors & Billson, 1992; Noguera, 2001). Therefore, many Black males view their success in sports or music as more promising than academic pursuits (Hoberman, 1997). Many of them experience success in athletics and are oftentimes acknowledged by peers, staff, and their community for their athletic abilities. The media portrays the lives of athletes as exciting, and these two areas are highly populated by African Americans, who in turn serve as role models for many African American males. Unfortunately, the appreciation and recognition does not carry over into the classroom and academic engagement, performance, and achievement suffers as a result. Schools also benefit by gaining a competitive reputation, and the vicious cycle continues.

Creating opportunities for students to participate in school activities, including but not limited to sports, in the earliest grades possible should be a priority for schools. Finn (1989) states institutional encouragement should be given in the earliest grades that non-academic participation is recognized. Generally speaking, when interventions are created at all levels, strategies to increase overall school participation should be coupled with academic interventions. A study conducted by Lloyd (1978) indicated a correlation between early school experiences and behavior problems in later years. The study consisted of a collection of third grade information on 788 boys and 744 girls of whom 24.8 percent and 18.5 percent, respectively, eventually left school without graduating. For dropouts and graduates, in terms of course grades, grade retentions, and standardized achievement scores, a significant difference was already evident. The study indicated
that students who were involved in school activities had significantly less or no behavior problems in school (Lloyd, 1978). Since there are avenues to early identification of students who are at risk of developing negative views about school, which will affect their academic engagement and performance, it is critical that appropriate, research-driven strategies are implemented in schools. According to the previous research of Lloyd (1978), participation in school activities in early elementary years is one avenue to address the drop out crisis. Schools should be proactive as early as third grade and the level of school failure experienced by African American males may decrease by the time they enter high school. It is no surprise that high school graduation and dropout rates along with college enrollment statistics as mentioned previously for African American males are alarming (Steele, 1997; Fine, 1987; Noguera, 2003). However, Osterman (2000) revealed that participation alone will not transfer into the classroom and increase academic engagement. Students can increase their participation without their sense of belonging increasing. In other words, students may be involved in extracurricular activities, such as sports, yet not feel they are connected to the school. In order to address the sense of belonging in African American male students, schools should couple involvement in activities along with emphasizing positive teacher/student relationships, as Osterman (2000) suggests.

**Biases with Potential to Become Barriers**

A teachers’ inability to recognize intelligence in minority students, particularly, African American males can be indicative of a bias. Unfortunately, the classroom behavior of African American elementary students is difficult for some teachers to interpret (Tyler, Boykin, & Walton, 2006). When teachers are unable to identify gifted
traits in African American students because their classroom behavior is different, these students are not recommended for Gifted and Talented Education (GATE). In other words, a Black student may possess above average intelligence and may be capable of succeeding in a more academically rigorous course but may be viewed as a behavior problem (according to the standards of the teacher). As a result, the student will remain on the current academic track, despite his or her academic ability. Consequently, the bias now becomes a barrier for the student. In fact, minority students who meet the academic qualifications for GATE are also affected by this bias. For instance, a student referral or nomination from a teacher is the first step in this often subjective process (Henfield, Owens, & Moore, 2008). One can see that the teachers’ perception of an African American male student plays a significant role in their academic journey. For example, the earlier research of Gagne (1994), as well as Hoge and Cudmore (1986), found that teacher’s ability to identify gifted students accurately is one of the most important factors affecting students’ acceptance into the GATE program. Thus, challenging educational opportunities can be missed, and Black students may not experience their fullest academic potential. Consequently, teachers become barriers to access and serve as “gate keepers” to gifted classrooms for African American students as well (Donovan & Cross, 2002, p.80). It is imperative that teachers are trained to identify intelligence in African American students as well as identify their own personal racial biases in order to avoid acting as academic barriers to African American males.

Another example of biases serving as barriers was revealed in a number of other studies (Elhoweris, Mutua, Alseikh, & Holloway, 2005; Ferguson, 1998; McBee, 2006; Woods & Achey, 2006). McBee (2006) conducted a study of 705,074 elementary
students in Georgia that indicated teachers were much more likely to refer Asian and White students than their Black or Hispanic peers to GATE programs. When the cultures and behaviors of students are different from the dominant culture and linguistic backgrounds are different, teachers may have negative attitudes about and lowered expectations of these students; thus these students are often overlooked for rigorous academic programs, such as GATE (Woods & Achey, 2006). Similarly, in regards to gifted education, Elhoweris, Mutua, Alseikh, and Holloway (2005) found race to be a factor in teacher referrals. Many teachers believe that African American students do not have the intellectual capability to be academically successful in gifted programs (Ferguson, 1998). Clearly, effective staff development programs, along with research driven conversations with all stakeholders, must become a systemic part of school practices. In regards to addressing the subjectivity of teacher referrals of students to more rigorous courses, including gifted programs, which often overlook African American students, collaboration and accountability would be critical. Furthermore, this paradigm shift will provide more opportunities and access to students who have been historically denied access to advanced and gifted programs. African American males and their teachers need to know that they are academically capable of succeeding and expected in accelerated programs such as GATE.

**Behind the Scene of Disengagement**

There are several theories regarding self-esteem and identification (Osborne, 1999). The effect that feedback has on different individuals depends on the value the individual places on the domain being addressed (Rosenberg, 1979; Tesser, 1988). Several authors argue that individuals selectively devalue domains in which they or their
group perform poorly. Therefore, African American males who are underperforming in school may selectively devalue academics and are unaffected by feedback given in this area. In academics, these students are considered *dis-identified* (McMillian, 2003 p.21). Dis-identification, according to McMillan (2003), is a defense mechanism that allows students to disconnect their self-esteem from academic domains and redirect their focus on other areas such as music, sports, and peers. These authors further suggest that individuals selectively value domains in which they or their group perform well (Crocker & Major, 1989; Major & Schmader, 1998; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Tesser, 1988; Tesser & Campbell, 1980). Consistent with Majors and Billson (1992), Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl and Van Acker (2000) suggest that African American males are particularly vulnerable and more susceptible to disengagement than any other group. When students are dis-identified with academics, they are neither intrinsically motivated when they perform well nor are they affected by poor performance. This response baffles many educators who initiate conversations with dis-identified students regarding their failing grades. Educators do not understand the source of disconnect. The apparently careless disposition of the student is oftentimes interpreted as a lack of concern; when in actuality, it is a learned coping mechanism that enables African American male students, in particular, to protect their self-esteem. For instance, if a student is not performing well and the teacher seeks to address the academic symptom alone, the teacher may see a nonchalant attitude, thereby interpreting the student as apathetic about their education. This teacher’s interpretation usually results in consequences for the student or in a strained teacher/student relationship, either of which causes the student to put up stronger defenses.
Another element that contributes to African American males’ lack of student success is the relationship factor between the minority student and the school. Minority students may regard school as valuable; however, when they are educated in majority context, oftentimes, feelings of strong connections or belonging do not develop due to negative experiences with members of the majority group (Booker, 2006). The academic performance and engagement of African American males, according to Booker, may not always be a result of the value placed on school. Some researchers argue that students of color are prevented from seeing themselves as scholars and oftentimes do not value academics due to factors inherent in American society, such as the limited number of professional, educated, Black male role models (Majors & Billings, 1992; Ogbu, 1992; Steele, 1991, 1997). Addressing the cause of dis-identification is critical as it contributes to or causes poor academic performance (Osborne & Rausch, 2001). Teachers and students alike could benefit from understanding this principle along with its repercussions. When teachers understand the causes of dis-identification, they are better able to identify it and be proactive or at least be equipped to respond properly to African American males with the goal of positively redirecting these students.

Studies indicate there are various factors that contribute to students’ attitudes toward school. Research has shown that the attitude of students in secondary schools toward academic achievement is highly influenced by their peer group (Phelan, Davidson & Cao, 1998). The vast majority of Black students, including males, would like to do well in school (Conchas & Clark, 2002; Kao & Tienda, 1998; Noguera, 2001). Other researchers have identified school practices and curricular issues as crucial factors that affect how African American males process their academic identities (Ravitch, 2000;
Tucker & Codding, 1998). For instance, African American males are more likely than White students to be placed in the lowest academic track, to be disciplined in higher numbers and to be negatively stereotyped by teachers (Conchas, 2003; Holzman, 2006). As mentioned earlier, this group is over-represented in special education programs and represents the highest percentages of suspensions and expulsions (Gardner & Talbert-Johnson, 2000; Lee, Windfield & Wilson, 1991; U.S. Office of Civil Rights, 2002). Cunningham (2001) suggests that the most highly stigmatized and stereotyped group in American is African American males. Unfortunately, negative forms of treatment in schools are more likely to be directed toward African American males (Noguera, 2003). Smitherman (1977) contends that adults perceive the behavior of Black children, males specifically, as hostile and insubordinate. Others suggest that Black males have particularly fragile egos and are susceptible to treating even minor slights and transgressions as an affront to their dignity and sense of self-respect (Kunjufu, 1985; Madhubuti, 1990; Majors & Billings, 1992; West, 1993). It may be possible that African American males’ fragile egos result from the negative forms of treatment they experienced both inside and outside of school systems.

For African-Americans, the lack of academic success can also be the result of a phenomenon known as the stereotype threat (Steele, 1997). According to Steele (1997), the stereotype threat is characterized as a social-psychological threat and occurs when an individual fears the possibility of fulfilling a negative stereotype. Steele (1997) argues that all students suffer from anxiety in school situations, but minority groups experience this anxiety to a higher degree because minority stereotypes abound. This stereotype threat can powerfully impact the academic performance of African American students.
This fear could confirm a negative group stereotype and could cause the student to become self-protective and reduce their identification with academics (Osborne, 1999). While this response fulfills the stereotype, it also allows the student to devalue this domain and it reduces the anxiety created from the situation (Epps, 1970; Katz & Greenbaum, 1963).

To demonstrate this point, in a study of college students (Steele & Aronson, 1995), cognitive interference was created by telling the students before taking an intellectually challenging test that group differences will be part of the results. In doing so, the achievement of stigmatized individuals was suppressed (Steele & Aronson, 1995). The researchers further argued that the knowledge of taking a test designed to show group differences was enough to create a situational stereotype threat. While NCLB reports test scores and documents the student group-testing gap, the stated purpose is to eliminate the achievement gap. NCLB’s practice in regards to reporting test data racially contradicts Steele and Aronson (1995) who suggest that unconscious cognitive interference is created for students when group differences in test scores are emphasized or even noted. It is possible for stereotype threats to influence academic engagement in the classroom, especially when there are only a few Black males (oftentimes, only one) in a class. For example, if a Black male is called upon to answer a question in class, his reaction may be a response to the pressure he feels to answer correctly, believing that his response is a direct reflection of his race. This conflicting feeling could set the stage for the dynamics associated with stereotype threat.

Impact of Teacher Expectations on Student Success
Education research literature generally states that the social support and encouragement that African American students receive from teachers influences their performance to a large degree more so than any other group (Foster, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lee, 2000). Caring teachers can create a strong foundation for learning. When teachers challenge, care for, and are interested in educating the whole child, it not only increases African American students’ self-expectations but it also influences their belief in their potential to achieve (Vondra, 1999). Also, current research suggests that the single most important school influence on student learning is the quality of the teacher (The Forum for Education and Democracy, 2008). Therefore, to improve access to a quality education and the academic achievement of students attending urban public schools, highly trained teachers are needed. Not only do urban public school students need highly trained teachers, but they also need teachers who are culturally competent. Black students are likely to have positive relationships with their teachers when they feel accepted, connected, and understood; this results in an increase in student motivation, student achievement and teacher expectation (Ford & Harris, 1996). Also, Carter’s (2005) research on African American and Latino urban high school students raises an important question about how schools process these students’ cultural identities. Her research, for example, suggests that African American and Latino students experience successful engagement and academic achievement when school officials recognize and affirm these students’ cultural identities as opposed to perceiving their cultural identities as the basis of their academic underachievement. What is important to point out is that African American and Latino students and teacher relationships are based on educators’ awareness and affirmation of the students’ racial identities (Carter, 2005). Unfortunately,
Barriers to Belonging

Black males are more likely to be tracked into low-ability courses and are more likely to be absent from honors and advanced placement courses (Oakes, 1985; Pollard, 1993). Not only do Black males need opportunities and preparation that will enable them to be successful in more rigorous courses, but they also need courses that include content that is culturally relevant and responsive (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Research reveals that the lack of culturally affirming curriculum leads to a lower level of academic achievement for minority students (Lee, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999). Steele (1997) as well as Majors and Billson (1992) argue that multicultural curriculum is more than periodic spotlights of people of color that supplement the primary curriculum, which Osborne (2007) implies may be more harmful to students of color due to the highlighting of difference in people of color. In contrast, true multicultural curriculum is infused throughout with contributions of people of color. Proponents of multicultural curriculum believe that this approach gives people of color a visible presence in academics and will assist with reducing stereotypes and anxiety. Majors and Billson (1992) go on to point out that this evolution in curriculum would help African American males find “their place” in education (p.27). This element must be implemented wisely in order to avoid dividing the learning community (Conchas, 2006).

One component of cultural relevant and responsive curriculum seeks to assist students in acquiring fluency in another language rather than helping them supposedly correct their home language (Hilliard, Perry, Steele, 2003). In a collection of writings on
the 1996 Ebonics debate, one teacher describes how she exposed her students to a variety of writings, including Black literary excellence that uses both Black language and edited American English (Perry & Delpit, 1998). It is important that this type of activity is a regular part of the curriculum and not an isolated demonstration of a systematic difference in the home language from edited American English. When value is placed on Black language, students are less inclined to believe they are limited to one or the other. They are better able to view the appropriate context for both. Therefore, teachers need to view their students’ culture and experiences as resources of knowledge that they can draw from and apply in their classroom. Incorporating culturally relevant material into the curriculum provides students with access to the curriculum; it allows students to bridge their cultural experiences with subject matter content, thereby creating a learning environment that would especially enable African American male students to engage with curriculum content.

Another example of cultural relevant curriculum is the Afrocentric model of instruction wherein the contributions of Blacks in all vital areas of the country’s establishment as a world power are emphasized (Harper, 2007). This type of recognition can help build or strengthen the racial identity of African American students by simply validating the work of their predecessors. Students are exposed to positive contributions of others of their same race, and their non-Black peers are introduced to the same material. This philosophy also directly addresses what Assante (1991) termed as Hegemonic education – the ideological presentation of educational material in such a way that it appears that African Americans and other non-White groups have not produced anything that has world-wide impact. The Afrocentric model of instruction also
emphasizes values and positive attitudes toward school and encourages students to structure their behavior in a way that is respectful and cooperative (Harper, 2007). In an effort to enable African American students to view their race in a positive manner, they are exposed to a philosophy that is “steeped in a rich cultural legacy of Black excellence” (Harper, 2007, p. 27). Not only does this curriculum address structure for behavior, it also addresses academic needs by providing instruction in Black history, cultural and political awareness, self-regulation, and community service (Harper, 2007). Perry, Steele, Hilliard, (2003) contend that the advantage to reading materials that reflect an Afrocentric perspective is that Black students will view their culture as a rich heritage that is filled with a history of educational pursuit.

Despite the odds, there is a body of research on human development that asserts educating all children at high levels, including African American males, is possible (Noguera, 2003). Lee (2000) in his research on the learning styles of Black children confirms this finding. Noguera (2003) argues that understanding the cognitive processes that influence how individuals adapt, cope, and respond is the only way to change behavioral outcomes; therefore, understanding attitudes that influence academic pursuits and perceptions of schooling must be part of the beginning efforts to improving the academic performance of African American male students. Underachievement patterns can be reversed when there is a willingness on behalf of the schools to re-evaluate current policies and practices in order to meet the academic needs of African American students. Creating a nurturing condition for academic engagement, coupled with resources and supports, will produce schools where academic success will not be the exception but the norm (Edmonds, 1979).
Some of the behaviors of African American male students will be challenging to eradicate because they are culturally engrained and the result of consistent, systemic school neglect. Drawing from the literature review on the educational experiences of African American males, it is obvious that more highly qualified, culturally competent teachers, who are sensitive, knowledgeable, and responsive to the educational needs of African American male students from elementary through high school, are needed to serve this often marginalized group of students. These students must be given more academic opportunities in terms of challenging curricula and special programs to give them confidence in their ability to be academically successful while retaining their cultural identity.

Summary

While this literature suggests that there are many factors that contribute to the school experience of African American males, it also identifies the influential role that schools play. The state of California has made an investment in addressing the achievement gap that exists between Black and White students with NCLB. The literature suggests that there is a clear correlation between teacher/student relationships and academic engagement. The research on this topic also substantiates both positive and negative impacts that teacher/student relationships have on African American males. However, there is very little literature that addresses school belonging among African American high school males with an emphasis on academic engagement; this study aims to make a small contribution toward filling this gap.
Chapter 3

Methods

This study attempted to identify how African American male students perceived their high school experience in regards to school belonging at Temple High School and how these perceptions influenced their academic engagement. African American males have been largely ignored by educational research, and this study seeks to increase the educational community’s awareness of this population of students. It is important that students feel that they are a part of, connected to, and valued by their school in order to experience school community membership. Osterman (2000) defines the primary members of a school community as teachers and students. Therefore, the interactions between African American male students and their teachers will significantly influence their sense of belonging to their school community. The purpose of this study was to better understand how students cope with and respond to the cultural environment of their school, particularly their classroom environment, and to improve the academic engagement of African American males by understanding the attitudes and experiences that influence how they perceive and respond to school and academic pursuits.

Through the use of structured interviews and qualitative research, this study sought to expand the literature by providing a better understanding of what African American male students thought about the institutional factors that influenced their academic performance. In order to gain insight into how schools as institutions may enhance or inhibit the educational experience for African American students, the study examined a number of factors that may have impacted the experience of this study’s target demographic. These factors included perceptions of relationships with their
teachers, their connections to the school, their definition and attitude of academic achievement, and the value they place on their membership in their school community. When the above mentioned factors were perceived as barriers to academic engagement, the influence of these factors on their classroom participation were examined.

My personal reasons for proposing these questions are:

• To better understand the experiences of African American male students in high schools and to be able to communicate it in a way that adds to the body of knowledge for P-12 educators.

• To gain information that can be given to students to help them better understand the effects and/or the benefits of school culture as they relate to student achievement.

• To make a contribution that has the potential to directly affect students that share my racial background. When only five percent of the school’s population is African American, it is possible that a predominantly Latino high school, with a major emphasis on the educational needs of Latino English Learner students, could overlook African American students’ educational needs.

• To communicate to this particular gender and race of students that their unique needs and challenges are worth being explored.

• To understand and address the needs of African American male high school students.

**Research Tradition**
This qualitative case study borrowed principles from the phenomenological approach. The case study approach involves a comprehensive description of the setting and participants; data is also analyzed for themes, patterns and issues. The reader develops a deeper understanding of the lived experiences through the perspectives of the participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). “I understand better what it is like to experience that,” is the feeling that readers of phenomenological studies should have (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 10). Rossman and Rallis (2003) argue that gathering information from a large number of sources will produce a study with breadth; however, gathering information from a few participants, allows the researcher to develop a deeper understanding of the occurrence, and the study gains depth. In this study, the perspectives of the participants regarding their sense of school belonging led to a better understanding of what schools can do to create cultures that prioritize positive relationships with African American males in order to increase their academic engagement. The most appropriate methodology, based on the focus of the study, was qualitative. Qualitative research has a goal of making social conditions better by seeking to answer real world questions (Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

Providing a comprehensive description of an experience and its meaning, through dialogue and reflection, is the focus of the researcher (Grbich, 2007). This focus assists in identifying the “core essence of human experience” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p.11). The primary methods of obtaining information were in-depth, semi-structured interviews and document reviews, the latter of which included transcripts, test scores, and discipline history. The possibility of misinterpretation of data diminishes when triangulation is
implemented and a thorough understanding of the phenomenon being studied is gained (Perry, Steele, Hilliard, 2003, p.89).

This current study described the barriers to school belonging for African American males and how these factors influenced their academic performance in high school. In more particular terms, it sought to describe how their perceptions of the barriers influenced what they ordinarily do and the meaning they ascribed to what they do under ordinary or particular circumstances, and present this description in a manner that draws attention to regularities that implicate cultural process (Wolcott, 1996).

Culture is not visible; therefore, it was critical that I embraced certain safeguards that preserved the integrity of the project in order to:

- Assist with improving academic achievement and the overall quality of life for African American male high school students.
- Assist educators in developing a culture that systemically addresses the needs of African American male high school students.

The focus of this investigation was narrowed to specific questions that were evaluated by consistently analyzing the interview protocol and by having it reviewed by my colleagues and dissertation chair.

**Research Setting**

Temple High’s student population in the 2008-09 school year consisted of 3231 students. The ethnicity of the students were diverse: 70% Hispanic, 15% White, 5% Black 4% multiple or no responses, 3% Filipino, 2% Asian, less than 1% American Indian or Alaskan, and less than 1% Pacific Islander. The English Learner population was 16% and the annual drop out rate was 1%. There were slightly more males (51%)
than females (49%). There were 126 teachers and the student to teacher ratio was 26:1. The free and reduce lunch participants accounted for 31% of the population. Temple high had an API (annual performance index) of 669 and did not meet the AYP (annual yearly progress) criteria, which was 691.

The data collection methods included document review and interviews. According to Bloomberg & Volpe (2008), interviews allow the researcher to elicit "rich, thick descriptions," to clarify statements, and to probe for further information (p.46). Three pilot interviews were previously conducted before the study. As a result, more effective interview questions were formulated and some questions were deleted. The protocol used in the pilot study revealed a need to eliminate redundancy in several questions, lessen the duration of the interview sessions, and include a variety of student perspectives. In the latter case, for example, all students in the pilot study were athletes, and their sense of school belonging was connected to their sport. The document reviews included transcripts and test scores that provided additional background information and concrete evidence that sometimes corroborated with the students’ perceptions as gathered in the interviews. These two data collection methods complemented each other, and this triangulation helped to provide an in-depth understanding of the study.

**Interviews**

Nine students were interviewed; the questions were designed to gather information regarding the culture of the school from “cognitive perspectives” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p.69). The questions for student interviews focused on students’ experiences in class, students’ perception of their relationship with their teachers, elements that connected them to school, their sense of belonging, their attitudes regarding
the importance of education, and their perceptions of their classroom involvement. A section in the school’s media center was used to interview two students after school; parents were called the night before each interview to confirm permission and asked if there were any questions. Reminders were sent to the students on the day of the interview during their last class of the day. Each day, two students were scheduled to be interviewed for a total of four days the fifth day was scheduled for the ninth student and open for any student who may have missed a previously scheduled interview. After the first day, scheduling became a problem due to after school sports or other commitments. As a result, alternate arrangements were made with students and parents for interviews to be conducted in their homes. Each interview session followed the same protocol and further questions and concerns were addressed before recording was stopped. In an effort to address concerns or questions that may have resulted from the interviews, each parent was called afterwards.

Students were high school juniors or seniors who had attended Temple High for a minimum of two years. Belonging is a process that occurs over time (Finn, 1989; Voelkl, 1997); therefore, grades 9 and 10 were excluded. Student files were accessed for the purpose of obtaining grade point average, with the permission of the students, parents, and school district.

**Document Reviews**

Document reviews were the final piece for analysis. Documents collected for this study included transcripts, California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) data, STAR data, current class schedules, and discipline files. Test scores were compared to transcripts in order to determine consistency in performance. CAHSEE data was
compared to STAR data in an attempt to discover if a gap existed between performance and ability when results have a direct consequence such as graduation. For instance, the CAHSEE is administered to all grade 10 students and a minimum passing score of 350 is required to obtain a high school diploma. Since passing the CAHSEE is a requirement for graduating from high school, it carries built-in motivation for those students who have graduation as a goal. Students in grades 11 and 12 who have not passed the CAHSEE are pulled out of their regular classes for retakes (during a scheduled testing time); many students consider not passing this test an embarrassment because graduation is threatened. This sometimes serves as motivation for students to pass on the first try. In contrast, there is no follow up with STAR results, students are notified through the mail and there are neither consequences nor incentives attached. Test scores were compared to the data from interviews that identify the barriers to school belonging. Each student was asked to identify their value of standardized testing, knowledge of their test history, and significance of the results. Transcripts were evaluated in an attempt to identify patterns in course placements as a result of testing status or behavior (tracking).

**Research Sample and Data Sources Narrative**

The data source was a purposeful sample; all participants met specific criteria – all data sources used in this study were African American male high school students in their third or fourth year of high school. All students were enrolled in general education classes (special education, independent study, and home hospital were excluded). The method used to collect this data was interviews. A roster of all 11th and 12th grade African American males was obtained from administration. Invitational flyers (Appendix B) were sent to eligible students with a date, time and room number to meet me and ask
questions if interested in participating in the study. The students of Temple High did not respond to the printed invitations. I had a conversation with the principal and permission was granted to speak with the staff advisor of the Black Student Union (BSU). I contacted the advisor and was invited to speak at the next meeting to introduce my study and myself. Interested parties were given consent forms and asked to return them the following day during lunch in the same room as the previous meeting, as I was on campus. Additional students were needed because there were more freshman and sophomores in attendance than juniors and seniors. I used the snowball effect and asked the interested participants for names of their friends who fit the criteria and would be interested in participating in the study as well. I contacted the students and spoke with each parent to arrange for the signing of consent forms, answering of questions, and interviews. Two interviews were actually conducted on the school site. Students received an official school call slip in their last class of the day reminding them to report to the stated room number or media center at the stated time of the appointment. Appointments were made for the first two students who returned forms, but conflicts in schedules due to sports and other obligations prevented additional after school interviews. Seven interviews were ultimately conducted in the homes of the students with parent permission. The goal was to collect statements, feelings, and thoughts that were reflective of the interviewees’ high school experiences as they related to their perceptions of school belonging. The responses from the interviews along with the students’ transcripts helped to better understand how these perceptions influenced their academic performance.
Interview data were used because it was the best way to gain information regarding barriers to belonging for African American male students in this particular school. Several protocol questions assisted in identifying the students’ routines and “the meaning they ascribed to what they do under ordinary or particular circumstances, and present this description in a manner that draws attention to regularities that implicate cultural process” (Wolcott, 1999, p. 68). Since the study also borrowed from the phenomenological tradition and focused on the perceptions of African American males, interviews and document reviews are appropriate and the best tools to gain the needed information. These tools also allowed me to gain an insiders’ perspective of the culture being observed.

The site sampling strategy was criterion-based sampling. Criterion sampling is defined by Miles (1994) as all cases that meet some criterion that is useful for quality assurance. It was appropriate for site selection because the research focus required a high school with a significant number of African American male students in the population; it was also appropriate for the sample selection because the focus was on the barriers to belonging for African American male students. Thus the primary participants were African American male students.

Approval was granted to conduct the study after a meeting with the superintendent of Temple School District and the principal of Temple High School. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) form was used to briefly describe the study and required signatures from the district were obtained to verify approval to begin the study in Temple High with African American male students. The research announcement
(Appendix B), information letter, parental Consent Form (Appendix C), and Interview Protocol (Appendix A) were used as research instruments.

The personal information of the informants who participated in the study was kept confidential; all names and identifying characteristics were removed. Each student, along with each parent, was informed of the study’s confidentiality in writing, via the Assent Form and Consent Form (Appendix C), respectively. They were also reminded verbally of the confidentiality agreement during their initial meeting. Students were reminded that their participation was voluntary; researcher explained that they could refrain from answering questions and withdraw from the study at any time. An additional reminder was given stating that neither rewards nor penalties would be received as a result of participating in this study. Each parent was called the night before the interview to remind them of the next day’s event, to confirm their consent, and to address any of their additional questions.

The strengths of the sampling strategy were: the announcement was sent to their classroom with school approval from a staff member (career specialist) who was a familiar source to many, and the interviews were conducted on campus. The weaknesses of the sampling strategy were: the lack of a screening process, the lack of a balanced set of participants due to being limited to only those students who returned their consent forms, and the small percentage of black males who were in the 11th and 12th grades.

**Data Analysis**

The process of analyzing the data began with transcribing the interviews. Rossman and Rallis (2003) assert that quality data analysis consist of deeply scrutinized
interview transcripts that are consistently inspected along with other documents to create coherent reports that have been methodically organized into relevant themes and patterns. Each interview was recorded and transferred to digital disc. Recordings of each interview were analyzed and notes were taken to confirm previous patterns. Listening to recordings repeatedly provided multiple opportunities to hear information that may have been missed during the interviews. Follow up questions were then developed to obtain clarity on particular responses. All transcriptions were professionally transcribed using line numbers for more efficient referencing. Microsoft Word was used to transcribe and format the data in preparation for analysis. Transcripts were revisited to identify themes for the purpose of coding.

Once each interview was transcribed and thematically coded, emerging themes were identified. Miles and Huberman (1994) describe coding as a review of transcribed interview data that are analyzed and assigned particular labels. Similarly, Rossman and Rallis (2003) emphasize the importance of grouping and re-grouping data in order to increase understanding of the different facets of the data. In an effort to understand if there was a consistent language among the participants, each interview was re-examined to compare concepts and themes. Re-examining the interviews also provided an opportunity to identify the similarities and differences among this group. The research question was continually referenced along with the literature to see if the data was confirmed or dispelled. Studying the codes that emerged from the interviews gave a better understanding of the perceptions of the “insiders” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p.52) and strengthened the descriptions of the patterns and regularities.

Role of Researcher
My study has evolved from the beginning of this program. In my Master’s cohort, I researched institutionalized tracking and discovered that I had a passion for addressing systemic barriers that affected student learning. I initially wanted to further this study but was advised to broaden my knowledge base which lead to the emergence of new research questions: How do African American males experience and perceive their sense of school belonging in a suburban high school? How does their perception influence their academic engagement?

The research setting is not new to me; however, I had to define my role for others and make sure that all participants understood my purpose there and what would happen with the data I collected. As an administrator in a different district, the possibility of barriers being created between researcher and other staff members was ever present. Sometimes, people believe that comparisons are being made between their sites and other sites and that their particular information will be shared. Nevertheless, staff involved responded positively to the fact that I was a fellow administrator from a different district. Participants found assurance in the fact that I was not officially affiliated with their site or district. It was my responsibility to articulate that the data I was gathering was simply to add to the knowledge base of educators; steps were taken to assure that this goal was accomplished while protecting the identity of participants, staff, and school. My interactions with the administrative staff provided assurance of confidentiality and created an atmosphere of partnership. My role required a level of sensitivity that displayed a respect for the staff and school culture and my disposition reflected my role as a researcher.
In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary source for information and his/her reliability is critical. In order to guard against researcher bias, I must acknowledge my assumptions in reflections. In an effort to record the mood, tone, surprises, questions, and overall atmosphere during the interview, reflections were typed after each interview.

I believe that my race had an effect on the case. I am of the same race as the participants, and it proved to be an influential component. For example, when calling parents to arrange home interviews, I felt an instant connection with the parents and invitations to their homes were immediately granted. In an effort to support the study, some of the parents rearranged their personal schedules to accommodate the interviews. The majority expressed an interest in the results of the study and invited me back to their homes. I am not certain of the level of influence my race had with students; however, all of the participants appeared comfortable during interviews.

I was affected by my study. I am the mother of two African American males, and I wondered how much of my participants’ experiences were shared by my own sons. One of my sons recently graduated from high school, and the other was in the same age range as the participants in the study. I often wondered how the parents would feel if they were listening to the interview or how much they already knew. It was important that I remained the principal researcher, and this role required that I remain objective. As the researcher, I sought to conceal my passion for the research topic in order to appear neutral during interviews. I did this in an attempt to avoid influencing or altering the participants’ responses. I used the tool of reflections to keep track of my thoughts even when they conflicted with my role as principle investigator. My personal biases were not
shared with the interviewees and additional questions were asked only for clarification. There was a certain level of familiarity that presented itself between me and the participants because of our shared ethnicity, and listening to previous interviews helped me monitor if and/or how much of the familiarity informed my protocols or the direction of the questions. My heart went out those participants who had not experienced as much success navigating the school system because there were obvious differences between the two groups. I wanted to tell some of them that they deserve more from the school system, and I had to resist the temptation to express approval of those areas where the students managed to succeed.

A researcher must be aware of potential bias that can be brought to the study (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Understanding one’s bias and taking proper measure to separate the etic (researcher’s) voice from the emic (participants’) voice will address the subjectivity of the researcher (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2003; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Although subjectivity cannot be totally eradicated, there are research protocols to assist with reliability and trustworthiness. As an African American female educator, I acknowledge that biases may have been present during this study. One of the biases that could have affected the study was my feelings regarding the lack of positive relationships the participants had with their teachers. None of the participants understood the correlation between their academic performance and their relationships with their teachers. Another bias that could have affected the study was my concern with how detached some of the participants were from the reality of the disproportionate number of African American teachers on staff. Since this is beyond their control, maybe it was a good thing that they did not focus on it. Clearly, some of the participants needed
additional organizational support, and I had to resist the urge to sympathize with them at particular times, continue to maintain my role as researcher, and not transition into acting as their advocate during the interviews. One method I used to monitor these biases was reflective journaling. By recording my thoughts, feelings, questions and disappointments, it placed me more in touch with my own reality and reminded me of the importance of maintaining objectivity in the study and helped me be better prepared for future interviews.

**Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the perceptions of African American high school males regarding their school experiences in relationship to their feelings of belonging and academic engagement. The primary methods for data collection were interviews and document review. Chapter four consists of a presentation of the findings of the study. Chapter five follows with a discussion of the findings, implications for practice and suggestions for further research.
Chapter 4

Results

The purpose of this study was to understand how school belonging influences the academic performance of African American male students at Temple High School. One of the goals of this study was to increase the educational community’s knowledge of and understanding about how African American male high school students’ sense of school belonging influences their academic engagement. This understanding can be instrumental in strengthening areas of teaching, learning, and relationship building that will increase school belonging and academic engagement of African American male students. Nine students participated in this study. Six were seniors and three were juniors. All of the participants were African American males and pseudonyms were given to each participant. Two of the seniors were athletes; four were not. The other three juniors were also athletes.

Each interview was recorded and transcribed; the responses to the interview protocol were placed in an excel document and coding was done thematically. Two colleagues reviewed the codes for consistency. I created posters using the responses to the interview protocol to create a visual of the common themes that emerged from the interviews. After analyzing the interview data, I identified four major themes for the study.

Data sources, therefore, were chosen very carefully in order to accurately capture the participants' perceptions regarding their high school experience. Data for this study included interviews and document review.
The document review consisted of transcripts and test history reports. Transcripts were used to determine if the participants were taking college prep courses that would meet a-g university requirements. I also reviewed transcripts to identify particular programs in which students were enrolled, such as Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), which is a college readiness program designed to increase the number of students who enroll in four-year colleges. AVID serves all students but focuses on the least served students in the academic middle. Test history reports included California Standardized Test (CST) scores for each year the participant was in high school as well as each participant’s California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) status. CST scores were used to determine each student’s level of proficiency (Far Below Basic, Below Basic, Basic, Proficient or Advanced) and to identify patterns of each participant’s performance in testing. CAHSEE scores were reviewed to determine if the participants achieved a passing score and were on track for graduation.

This chapter presents findings obtained from a total of nine semi-structured, in-depth interviews, with six senior and three junior African American males. Eight out of nine participants lived with at least one parent in a middle class neighborhood near Temple High. Each interview took between 45 minutes to one hour.

**Interview Setting and Background**

The first interview took place after school, in the Black Student Union (BSU) advisor’s office, which was located in the music building. The office was connected to a large classroom that was divided by a glass window and a door. There was band equipment and audio-visual equipment stored in this office, as the advisor was also the band director and taught visual arts. The advisor was working in the classroom while the
interview was taking place. Although we (myself and the interviewee) could see and be seen by the advisor in his classroom, no one outside the office could hear the interview session. Choir practice started in the middle of the interview and the noise of the piano was a little distracting, causing some of the questions and answers to be repeated during the interview, yet the interview was completed without much incident.

The second interview took place in the Career Center, which is located in the middle of the campus. Again, Temple High has over 3,200 students, and many students remained on campus even though school had been dismissed for approximately 15 minutes. There were teachers, administrators, and campus security positioned visibly throughout the middle of the campus, which is called the quad. The second participant walked to the Career Center and the interview began on time. The Career Center was decorated with military and college posters and pennants. Tables and chairs were neatly organized and created an atmosphere conducive to multiple school purposes. A few minutes into the interview, the school band began to practice directly behind the Career Center. There were drums, horns and other instruments competing for our attention. There were also other students in the Career Center needing assistance from the Career Specialist, so it was a struggle to speak loud enough for the recorder while also maintaining some level of privacy for the sake of the interview.

There were scheduling conflicts with the remainder of the participants, and on-site interviews were difficult to arrange. The other seven participants had either some type of practice or other commitment that made it impossible for them to meet before 6:00 p.m. and two of them could only meet on a Saturday. I was flexible and agreed to make alternate arrangements. The remaining interviews were scheduled with the students and
confirmed with at least one parent. One parent agreed to be home for the interview but was not present in the space where the interview took place. Six of the seven homes visited were very similar, nicely furnished and clean, and family pictures filled the walls. Trophies, awards, and certificates were hanging on the walls of the six athletes; some of these paraphernalia were from as far back as little league. Parents remained out of sight until the interviews were completed; most were single parent mothers. Interviews three through eight took place at the dining room table in each home. These interviews ended on the same note, the participant notified the parent or guardian that the session was over and most of them expressed an interest in reading the study. On the other hand, Paul was the exception; he lived with his grandmother in an apartment complex a little further away from Temple. His grandmother was not feeling well and explained that she had been battling a series of serious illnesses. The interview was conducted in the dining room, which also served as a study. In the dining room there was a desk with a computer, a small sofa and two chairs. There were no pictures on the wall, and the living room did not have any furniture.

**Student Academic Backgrounds**

The participants’ academic profiles (Table 4.1) include their names (pseudonym), student athlete status (athlete or not), grade level, grade point average (GPA), $a$-$g$ requirement status (met or not met), graduation requirement status (met or not met) and CAHSEE status (passed or not passed). The participants’ academic profile consists of current overall grade point average, grade level, “a-$g$” requirement status, graduation, and CAHSEE status. This information was compiled from the document review.
Table 4.1 Student Academic Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME (pseudonym)</th>
<th>ATHLETE</th>
<th>GRADE LEVEL</th>
<th>GPA</th>
<th>A-G Met</th>
<th>Grad Reqs Met</th>
<th>CAHSEE ELA (Passed)</th>
<th>CAHSEE Math (Passed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Grade 10</td>
<td>Grade 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Grade 10</td>
<td>Grade 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Grade 10</td>
<td>Grade 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Grade 10</td>
<td>Grade 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>*No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silas</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>*No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Grade 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timothy</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3.01</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Grade 10</td>
<td>Grade 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samuel</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>*No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Grade 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>*No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Grade 10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *Student has obtained the appropriate number of credits towards graduation but has not passed one or more portions of the CAHSEE.

The University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) require entering freshmen to complete certain courses in high school. These courses are called a-g requirements because of the letter each subject is assigned. For example, a represents history/social science; b represents English; c represents mathematics; d represents laboratory science; e represents language other than English; f represents visual and performing arts and g represents college preparatory elective. California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) is a state test that every student has to pass with a minimum score of 350 (450 being the highest) in order to receive a high school diploma. Students take this test for the first time in the 10th grade, if they do not pass one or both sections they have two more opportunities in the 11th grade and three opportunities to take it in the 12th grade. If a student does not pass in the 12th grade, they will receive a certificate of completion at graduation in lieu of a high school diploma (special education students have a process in which they can be exempted from this requirement). The CAHSEE
data was included because it is possible for a student to meet academic graduation requirements, through course completion, yet not have all graduation requirements met due to not passing one or both sections of the CAHSEE.

**Main Research Questions**

The findings of this study were generated by two questions:

1. How do African American males experience a sense of school belonging in a suburban high school?

2. How does their sense of school belonging influence their academic engagement?

This chapter addresses these research questions as well as identifies themes that emerged from conversations with the participants during their individual interviews. In doing so, this chapter provides understanding and knowledge about school belonging and how it influences African American male high school students’ academic engagement. In an effort to better understand the perceptions of the participants, their experiences and quotes, a brief description of each is given in the student informant profiles. A discussion of major themes will follow.

**Student Informant Profiles**

Matthew was a 17 year-old senior and athlete who did not like school during his freshman year. He failed English and math in his second term. English was his least favorite class, but after developing a relationship with his 10th grade English teacher, he moved from a college preparatory English class to an advanced placement (AP) English class and stated that it was now his favorite class. This student exhibited a strong sense of academic pride, a high level of social awareness, and emotional intelligence. Matthew has plans to go to a four-year university and had a career goal.
Mark was a 16 year-old junior, athlete, and AVID student. He was one of three participants who had never failed a class but admitted that vocabulary and math were his biggest challenges. His favorite class was English because it was his first AP class (required by AVID) and several athletes were in the same class. He planned to go to a four-year university but was undecided about a career goal.

Luke was a 17 year-old senior, who planned to attend community college and transfer to a four-year university. His main goal was to get out of high school and move on with his life.

John was a 17 year-old senior. This young man was very personable, not shy, and appeared to enjoy the opportunity to be heard. John mentioned that he had a favorite teacher, who was a Black female, and stated that she put up with a lot from him during his freshman year. He felt fortunate to have her again and admitted to listening to her more. He stated that his plan was to go to a four-year university and major in business management.

Paul was a 17 year-old senior, and he was the only student who previously considered dropping out of school due to home and school difficulties. This student had a favorite teacher, who was a Black male, for the first time in high school and credited this teacher for opening his eyes to a lot of things. For instance, Paul stated that this teacher is responsible for him taking school more seriously and paying attention in class. He mentioned going to a university but was not aware of the requirements.

Silas was a 17 year-old senior. This young student had one favorite teacher, a Black female, and stated that she taught him a lot more than U.S. history; she taught him
“how to tell right from wrong.” The “A” he received in her class was the first in his high school experience.

Timothy was a 17 year-old senior and athlete, who attended an academy within the school. This academy, a smaller learning community, offered similar advantages as the AVID program, such as enabling students to take AP classes and helping them understand and meet a-g requirements. Timothy did not have a favorite teacher, but he was one of the few students who had never failed a class. Timothy planned to attend a four-year college.

Samuel was a 17 year-old junior and athlete and was one of the few students who had never failed a class. He described his relationship with his teachers as “average, nothing special”. Samuel never had a favorite teacher and mentioned that he has always struggled with science. Samuel was considering going to an out-of-state, four-year university.

David was a 16 year-old junior, athlete, and AVID student. He had a favorite teacher, one who taught United States history, and enjoyed learning in her class. History was has favorite subject, and he planned to attend a four-year college, play basketball, and major in History.

**Major Themes**

This chapter presents the following four major themes that emerged during the investigation based on the two primary research questions:

1. The differences in school belonging experienced by student informants included the differences between athletes and non-athletes. Some students did not feel that they belonged at all; some students felt a sense of belonging because of their peers, while
others felt a sense of belonging to their sports team. The overall school experiences varied for athletes and non-athletes. The athletes were surrounded by adult staff members who served as support, while the non-athletes were not.

2. The majority of student informants who experience academic engagement seemed to be influenced by caring student-teacher relationships. While these students had average to below average grades and participation in other classes, the relationships that were established with caring teachers influenced their class participation, student learning and ultimately academic performance.

3. The majority of the student participants expressed a need for a culturally relevant curriculum. Many of the students voiced feelings of being overlooked by the lack of representation of their culture in the classroom. Participants expressed that an acknowledgement of the accomplishments by African Americans would give them something to take pride in, help to counter the negative stereotypes perpetuated by the media and dispel some of the negative beliefs that some hold regarding the intellect of African Americans.

4. Participants expressed different views regarding the role of race in their academic environment and performance. While a few participants expressed neutral feelings regarding their academic environment, stating that it has been their only experience and therefore, the norm; others expressed a desire for more diversity. Some of the participants also expressed how their race influenced their academic performance.

Students in this study experienced school belonging (which was addressed by using the term *connected*) differently. For the purpose of this study, school belonging is defined as feeling a part of, connected to, included in and accepted by the school
community. Therefore, using the word connected did not alter the focus of the study in any way. When the first two participants were asked about school belonging and did not understand the term, the researcher used the term connected and there was an immediate association. For example, when the main research question (how do African American males experience and perceive their sense of school belonging in a suburban high school? How does their perception influence their academic engagement) was read to the first two interviewees, and they were asked to describe what they thought the study was regarding, each of the participants were hesitant to answer and said, “I don’t know.” Then I asked the student to describe their sense of school belonging and a long pause filled the room. I added the question that asked the participants how connected they felt to their school and both students were able to respond quickly. Therefore, I replaced the term school belonging with the term connected, when interviewing all nine students.

There was a noticeable difference in school experiences for athletes and non-athletes. All of the athletes socialized in a specific area of the schoolyard that is called by other students, as well as staff, the football bench. High school athletes many times are provided benefits such as teacher and administrator’s recognition, social status, popularity and academic supports. Student athlete informants in this study experienced school belonging that was directly related to their status and popularity that provided them benefits such as mentors and supports. Conversely, student non-athlete informants were not a part of any school club or student organizations and their sense of belonging was generally based on satisfaction with social interactions with their peer group. School belonging for non-athletes student informants seems to be with informal student peer group associations. Unlike the athletes, the non-athlete participants did not share a
common group of friends. John, one of the non-athletes, however, did socialize near the football bench. This student enjoyed the popularity that was associated with athletes who gathered around the football bench.

All students in this study who reported having a favorite teacher experienced an improvement in academic engagement and performance in that particular teacher’s classroom. I did not define the term favorite teacher; rather, I asked the students if they had a favorite teacher, and each student defined why a particular teacher was their favorite. Each student’s description of their favorite teacher shared a common theme, a perception of caring on the part of the teacher that resulted in the development of a caring, teacher-student relationship; which in turn, motivated each participant to participate in class and improve their academic performance. Each participant with a favorite teacher mentioned the above average grade in this particular class in comparison to the grade in same subject the previous year. The improvement in performance was also reflected in their academic transcript. The majority of the participants (five of six) who had a favorite teacher were athletes.

The third theme involved the expressions of the students in this study regarding a desire for a more culturally relevant curriculum and more representation in the Black male student population. This above theme was interesting in the sense that it was related to the other themes of belonging to the school in terms as to who they are as African American students. All of the students stated that they believed they would have more friends and receive recognition as a group, if more Black male students attended.
The fourth and final theme addressed how race influenced the academic performance of the participants and their desire for an increase in the Black male student population.

**Students’ Perceptions of School Belonging**

This section is the first of three themes to be addressed in this study. In the process of trying to comprehend the experiences that contributed to the participants’ feelings of school belonging, three sub-themes emerged: Students’ Perception of School Connections, Students’ Perceptions of Their School and The Athlete and Non-athlete Divide. Understanding the perceptions of the participants regarding their school experiences was an important goal of this study. When asked their favorite thing to do in school, all nine participants’ responses were essentially the same; that they like to socialize. Likewise, all of them had a consistent area on campus where they hung out during break and lunch. The athletes, regardless of sport, socialized at the football bench. The sense of belonging, for the athlete participants was not race; it was athletics. The Black athletes reported that they were dispersed among the group and race did not divide the team. The non-athletes had a specific place on campus were they socialized as well. The sense of belonging was not defined by race for this group either; it was their social experiences and the satisfaction they gained from their peer relationships. Two of the three non-athletes, Luke and Paul, had separate peer groups from each other; however, they both reported that their peer groups were not Black students. The other non-athlete, John, reported being friends with a lot of athletes and, therefore, he spent time near the football bench. He explained his relationship with the athletes as follows:
Yeah, I hang out at the, well right next to there’s a bench with all the football players, the football bench basically and ours is right next to that so you can basically say the tables are like together because we all communicate with each other.

This student enjoyed the shared attention of being in close proximity to the athletes.

There were varying degrees of school belonging among the participants. Some felt a sense of belonging to the school because of their peers, the positive relationships developed through socializing, while others expressed a sense of belonging because of sports. Five of the nine students who, with the help of some teachers, began to develop school belonging through learning and preparing for college and a better future. These students were beginning to experience a shift in their thinking regarding school. For example, Matthew and Mark were taking their first AP or honors class during their 11th and 12th grade year. Both Matthew and Mark stated that they were reluctant to take more rigorous courses in previous years because of the workload, the absence of other Black students and their perceptions of their academic ability. When Mark was asked about his knowledge of Honors and AP classes, he responded, “I know that the work is harder and normally there are no Black people in these classes and that’s why we [Black students] don’t wanna take them, but since we in AVID we starting to take these classes too.”

Seven of the nine participants made statements that AP classes were essentially for the smart kids and these same participants did not view themselves as part of the smart group. For example, Mark, when describing his teachers stated, “Some of them are nice, but some of them only like the smart kids.” Timothy was asked to explain what he knew about AP and Honor classes, he responded, “That they are high, they’re advanced classes
and usually like intelligent kids or the more smarter kids take them.” Conversely, caring teacher relationships influenced Matthew, Mark, David and Samuel to accept the challenge to take more rigorous courses. Their thinking shifted from a focus on the increased workload to accepting the academic challenges of AP courses.

The participants’ sense of school belonging was influenced by what the students valued, what they felt a part of, and what encouraged them to engage academically. Hearing their perceptions about their school setting and other experiences was critical to this study. When asked how connected they felt to their school, four of the nine students reported not feeling connected at all; three of these four were athletes. For instance, Matthew, an athlete, felt that he was:

. . unfortunately not that connected, like football would probably be the main thing that’s connected me to school, but other than that I mean I come to my classes and I go, part of that I blame myself, coming into high school I didn’t get into ASB (Associate Student Body) or clubs.

This student expressed a diminished sense of school belonging once practices and games ended. Matthew, like many others in this study, did not have any expectations of the school as a learning institution where belonging is facilitated nor did they hold the institution responsible for any of their negative school experiences. For example, the following student expressed his seasonal belonging to the school and blames himself for not finding additional ways to become more connected.

Mark had a similar response to Matthew when asked how connected he felt to Temple High but took a long pause before replying, “Honestly, not connected at all, like not to the school anyway, but I like playing football.” This student expressed a
connection with his peers, who were fellow athletes but did not know what it would take for him to feel more connected to the school.

Another student reported a seasonal connection to school. Silas reported, “During football season I feel like I’m a big part of the school, but I’m a senior now, and I’m done with football, I feel a part of it [school] but it’s not the same.” Again, football is the main school-related activity that provides this student with a meaningful sense of belonging to school, and according to his interview responses, football is equated to his peer group.

The one non-athlete participant reported not feeling connected to school replied, “Well, I guess just for me, school, I’ve never really felt a deep connection with it.” This student had not encountered a teacher who tried to establish a relationship with him, someone he considered a favorite teacher, and he was not involved in any clubs or school activities either. He was also one of the four, who did not have an African American teacher during school. Silas also mentioned that his peer social group at school did not include other Black students. He could not think of anything that his teachers or the principal could do to help him feel more attached to his teachers, the administrators, and/or staff.

Six of the nine students reported feeling that they had a caring teacher relationship. For instance, John proudly expressed, “[I feel] really connected, I know everyone basically, even teachers I don’t have I know them somewhat and they somehow know me.” John liked being popular, although he was not an athlete; he spent every day near or visiting the football bench. It was understood that the football bench was for a select group of people and others were welcomed as visitors only. Timothy declared, “I feel real connected. When I graduate I want to stay here, not stay in the school but help
out.” This student expressed that while only one teacher stood out as his favorite, there were others that he considered nice and helpful.

Peer groups created belonging for some participants. Relationships were important to John, he explained, “Well, the reason I feel connected, now I feel connected because, like, I know a lot of people and I have a lot of friends at my school, so that’s the reason why I feel connected.” Johns’ identity was tied to the students he knew and the students who knew him. His statements expressed more pride in popularity than academics or anything else school related. This participant had the lowest grade point average of the nine, and, yet, he managed to develop relationships that attracted him to school.

When asked about other social aspects of their school experiences, eight of the nine students expressed a desire for more Black male students. Eight of the participants felt the experience of having more Black male students on campus would be positive. All stated that they would have more friends and be able to relate to more people. There was no record of racial division among the athletes, the common interest among this group was clearly sports and the connection was not based on race. The Black male population at Temple High was small and the Black male athlete population was smaller. They learned how to navigate through a school where the African American student population was less than five percent. This was also true of the non-athletes; two of the three non-athletes stated their peers were not other Black Students. Their peer group connection was also based on something other than race.

Students’ Perceptions of their School
While the majority of the students expressed positive feelings when asked to describe their school, some had mixed feelings. Two out of nine responses mentioned academics. For example, Matthew pointed out, “it’s a good school, concentrated on academics,” but conceded “it’s also easy to get distracted.” Samuel commented on the AVID program and the annual college tours scheduled for grades nine through twelve AVID students, “The AVID program is good, it’s what makes me like the school, we go to actual colleges.” Still, Timothy had a different perspective and noted that although it was a good school, there was “a lot of drama and too many fights.” It was interesting that most of the students focused on the positive. Their statements were general without many details. For example, Luke stated, “It’s a good place if you want a out of culture experience.” This student went on to explain that being Black placed him at a disadvantage because there was nothing at school that resembled anything like his culture. I asked the participants to list one thing they would like to change about their school. Five of the nine students did not know what they would change or felt that nothing needed to change. Three of the nine students listed demographic changes. For instance, one student mentioned changing the way the school is “so sectioned off, so segregated.” Mark elaborated on his desired change, “I would have more Black people here, students and teachers even office workers. It would just be good to see more Black people.” Paul’s comment focused more on the African American student representation at the high school: “I would change the percentages of races. I think I’d try to even it out to 25% of each race so everybody could feel comfortable.” Some of the participants stated they would have more friends because it is easier to relate to their own race. Matthew thought that more Black males would bring recognition to the race, stating, “It
would force the students and school to recognize us more.” Timothy shared his perspective on the idea of an increase in Black males, “I think the Mexicans would chill out some because there will be more of us and I think the school would pay more attention to us too.” None of the participants, however, expressed animosity toward their school or any other race. With the exception of a few participants, the majority of the students could not identify areas in the school or anything about the school that needed to change. Their comments were always about what they personally could do better or what they wish they would have done differently. For example, when asked to identify a grade they would like to repeat, the majority of the participants stated grade nine. There were no references to any favorite teachers or any type of injustice as a reason for this common desire. Rather, their reasons were similar in that they did not take high school seriously their freshman year. Six out of nine participants failed at least one class during their freshman year. However, all of them have retaken the courses and are on track for graduation.

The Athlete and Non-Athlete Divide

My initial impression was that the student athletes would feel a strong sense of school belonging, but that was not the case for the student athletes that participated in this study. Three of the six student athlete’s feelings of belonging were only seasonal; after their sport season was over, they reported their sense of school belonging to be different. Although they experienced a lesser sense of belonging, they still felt they belonged. Two of the athletes were involved in more than one sport, and this was not an issue for them. Yet, for the other four students that played one sport, the ending of a season had an emotional effect on them. They acknowledged that when there were no games to look
forward to at the end of the school week and the spotlight of excitement that they once received was redirected to athletes who participated in a different sport, their experiences changed. Mark expressed his sentiments, “It’s different for me because like, when football is over, I like don’t have practice and I have a lot of free time and it seems like everything is different, now everybody focus on basketball.” David added, “I should be use to it by now, I’m a senior, but it’s kinda boring at school now, but I don’t have to stay up so late to do my homework no more.” For many of the athletes, their identities and motivations centered on the excitement and popularity of being active athletes. Although the experience of the football bench was inclusive of all sports, the conversations were driven by the sport in season. Fortunately, the athletes described the climate of the bench as one of camaraderie more than competition. As athletes, the participants had earned status and popularity, and the supports they received were provided throughout the academic year. Their sense of belonging remained, however the main adjustment for each of them in terms of school belonging appeared to be personal and individual and related to feeling of a sense of lost in attention and popularity.

Although sports played a major role in the lives of six of the nine participants, relationships were developed with teachers, coaches, and peers that helped the students focus on their academic goals that extended beyond the sport. Athlete participants appeared to use sports as a pathway to navigate through the high school curriculum and move on to a college education. All of the athletes reported having a goal of attending a four-year university; however, the non-athletes, who were all seniors, were not only ineligible to attend a four-year university but also did not express a desire to attend a university. There was one non-athlete, John, who self reported an inflated grade point
average and announced that he would be transferring to a four-year university, despite the fact he had not applied to a college or the university after the deadline to apply had passed. Coaches were not required to facilitate the academic safety nets that were provided for the athletes; however, many of the athlete participants would have had different stories if the built-in supports offered to them as athletes did not exist. The information regarding and access given to AP courses is an added benefit of being an athlete. All athlete participants stated they were enrolled in AVID after making their particular sport team. According to the athletes, players are expected to be in AVID, unless they are a part the law academy, which is a program especially designed for students who desire to pursue a career in law. The law academy also has a college focus. Once a student met the requirements to join a particular sports team, their name was given to a counselor, and, if the student was not in the law academy, AVID was added to their class schedule. This personalized academic attention is valuable in a school where the population of students is over 3,000 because in such a large school, students often do not receive such individualized attention.

In contrast, the non-athletes were neither involved in AVID nor encouraged to take more rigorous courses. Based on each of their transcripts, which revealed basic level courses, average to below average grade point averages, and low CST scores, the non-athletes were not academically prepared for more rigorous courses. Yet, the athletes were in college preparatory courses with the intention of taking at least one AP course by their senior year. It is important to point out that although Matthew, Mark, David and Samuel have an interest in continuing to playing sports when they get to college, none of them mentioned receiving an athletic scholarship or becoming a professional athlete.
It appeared that athlete participants and coaches alike viewed sports as a pathway for students to navigate through high school and onto college. Mark describes some of the academic motivation he received as an athlete, “All the coaches tell us things like, you gotta get good grades to play ball and be in AVID so we can like go to different colleges, not just the ones around the corner.” Timothy speaks of the excitement on game days regarding grade checks,

“It’s cool to see everybody on Fridays getting their grade sheets signed but you can tell the ones who not so happy, they don’t have theirs in their hands, it’s like in their notebook or something.” David shared, “it don’t matter to me what college I go to, I’m just glad I had to keep my grades up for basketball and now I can graduate and go to college, I think, yeah, all the athletes graduate, that’s all they talk about at the football bench now.”

Athletics, at Temple High not only offered social benefits but also provided an academic support group for some students.

While it may be true that not all athletes at Temple High are taking advantage of the academic supports offered, all athletes in this study were in academic courses that met graduation and a-g requirements. In addition, four out of the six athletes were in AVID, and one was in a small learning community within the school. The football players were assigned football buddies, a staff member who volunteered to serve as mentor to a football player for one year. If the student and mentor reported that a positive relationship was being developed according to the goals that were established between the student, mentor, and coach, then the match was considered to be a success and continued another year. According to the football players, feedback from football
buddies was given to coaches each quarter and evaluated by the team of coaches at the end of the year. The basketball players stated that because their team was smaller than the football team, their coaches served as their mentors, and each varsity player was responsible to mentor a junior varsity player. The participants who were varsity players mentioned that junior varsity basketball players were also expected to mentor freshmen. The goal of the team, stated by David and Samuel, was to have an adult and a peer for support.

In a school this size, the facilitation of relationships that were components of the athletic program at Temple High, such as AVID teachers, peer and adult mentors, served as an additional support mechanism. Not only were there academic benefits to playing sports, such as access to AVID, college prep courses, grade checks, and a minimum grade point average expectation, but also there were peer and adult role models who helped these Black male student athletes to successfully complete high school. These were obvious benefits from the guidance given to athletes and the relationships that were formed.

Through sports, it appeared that the participants developed and maintained the discipline they needed to remain academically eligible and take college prep and honors classes. According to the transcripts of each athlete, none of them dropped below a 2.0 grade point average at any point in the school year. In addition, only the athletes in AVID understood the value of AP and honors classes and were taking their first honors and AP classes when they were juniors and seniors, respectively. Yet, only three of the six athletes were taking an AP class. The same three of the six athletes had been approached about taking AP classes because taking an AP class is a goal for each AVID
student. In contrast, the non-athletes, who were also seniors, were taking standard-level courses that met graduation requirements only and had never been approached regarding more rigorous coursework. One of these non-athletes had not passed the CAHSEE, which placed him in danger of earning a certificate of completion instead of a high school diploma. For the participants in this study, athletes experienced academic and social benefits that non-athletes did not. The sense of school belonging differed for each participant and many of them attributed their belonging to their satisfaction with peer group. Overall, the students had positive things to say about their school. There was an obvious gap in the school experiences of athletes and non-athletes. Another aspect of school belonging was addressed through analyzing the relationships between the participants and their teachers.

Students’ Perceptions of Their Relationships With Teachers and Their Academic Engagement

Student-Teacher Relationships and their Performance along with Student perceptions of Other Teachers were two sub-themes that emerged from the main theme in this section. The goal of caring teachers is to encourage, motivate, and inspire students to learn and this study suggests that the participants responded positively when this occurred. Students looked to find something that they could gravitate to and rely on in order to feel a sense of belonging in the academic environment. When caring relationships were established between teacher and student, students often reciprocated with a strong appreciation of learning. Matthew summed up the importance of this notion when he stated, “There’s a lot of great things in the world, money, stuff like that, but there’s nothing that compares to when you’re in class and you have the same level of
understanding as the teacher on a certain topic.” This statement expresses the student’s desire for a level of academic achievement that results in personal gratification. Matthew viewed having the same level of understanding as his teacher as a great accomplishment. When asked if they had a favorite teacher, six of nine students replied yes, and all of their answers were relationship based. The participants also described how they felt about learning in the class. Below are descriptions of the teacher-student relationships from the perspective of the six students who reported having a favorite teacher.

**Matthew**

Matthew was one of the more articulate and thoughtful students when it came to describing his relationship with teachers and how these relationships affected him personally. One of his teachers decided to share something personal about herself at the beginning of the school year before she asked the class to share information about themselves. Matthew considered the initiative taken by this teacher to be an expression of care. This teacher demonstrated a level of transparency that was rare for him: “You could see the scar on her chest and like, that scar spoke.” For Matthew, this connection with the teacher ran much deeper than the surface scar because this teacher shared personal experiences from her own life. Her explanation for talking about the scar was to emphasize the importance of perseverance and to encourage her students to respond to challenges in the same way, according to Matthew. What was of particular interest about Matthew’s interactions with this teacher was that the relationship was personal and school related. As Matthew stated, “She’ll talk to you about other things than just school.” He also stated that when he sees her on campus, they still share conversations, even though two years have passed since he has taken her class. Not only did Matthew
describe the personal nature of the relationship, he described how this teacher motivated him:

It was English [the class she taught] and that’s not really, I mean its probably one of my strongest subjects now but it’s ironic because I don’t like it. I didn’t like English, but she was my English teacher. She actually helped me turn my whole way of viewing school around because prior to my sophomore year, my freshman year I came into school being lazy, thinking I’ll have four years at this school. I can take freshman year off. I could take it easy, so I did, and when I came back sophomore year she was probably the motivational factor for me about my school life. So she helped me visualize school in a whole different way and turn my grades around, learning definitely helped me in that class.

This relationship encouraged Matthew to pursue academic excellence in English and challenge himself: “After reading one of my papers in class one day, she called me to her desk, called the AP English teacher on the phone and moved me into English AP herself, then she talked to the counselor.” Matthew pointed out that the teacher warned him that the advanced class would be challenging, but assured him of his ability to succeed. This episode is an example of a caring teacher who served as a student’s academic advocate.

Matthew reported that he enjoyed learning in this class: “she made it fun to learn and when it’s fun to learn something you like to do it. So, I liked learning to write essays.” It was evident that the interaction between teacher and student influenced the academic engagement and academic performance. Matthew pointed out, “She actually helped me turn my whole way of viewing school around.” This student kept a serious
face when describing his relationship with his favorite teacher, but relinquished smiles whenever he talked about his grades or other academic accomplishments in this class. His responses and body language suggested he took pride in this achievement. Somehow, the teacher was able to effectively motivate him to not only engage in the subject matter but also excel academically.

Matthew identified characteristics in this teacher that were nurturing and caring. He mentioned the teacher contacting some of his other teachers to receive updates on his academic and behavior progress in their class. According to Matthew, this teacher scheduled a conference with one of his teachers after he received a below average grade on a test. Matthew reflected, “She was like my school mom.” For instance, Matthew credits his change of attitude toward school and learning to the many talks he had with her and the encouragement he received from her. This teacher offered support, but she also held him accountable by following up on his missing assignments and calling his home when he would “get lazy,” according to Matthew. This accountability was not limited to her class alone; she expressed concern about his other classes as well. Matthew earned his first A in English his sophomore year. His experience is an example of success as a motivating factor on its own. He continued to comment on his academic success in this class, “I liked, you know, doing vocab tests and getting back a 19 out of 20 or 20 out of 20. So when you like to do something like that you’re going to try your hardest.” Matthew has maintained an A average in English since his sophomore year and credits this teacher, “I owe it all to her as a teacher.” Prior to his sophomore year with his favorite teacher, Matthew acknowledged that his motivation for performing in class was maintaining his eligibility to play football; he stated that learning was not his goal. The
caring relationship he developed with his favorite teacher helped him find value in learning that went beyond the football field.

Mark

Mark reported that the caring relationship with his favorite teacher did not begin with teaching. Mark stated that on the first day of school, this teacher decided to share parts of her life as a mother with the class. To Mark, this set the tone for how he responded to her the rest of the school year: “After that, it was like we family and she cared about us before she even knew us.” Mark mentioned that this was rare and that he felt good about being in this class from the first day. When Mark began to reflect on his favorite teacher, he pointed out:

She could relate to the athletes, she got two sons who was athletes in high school and she know how hard it is to be a student and athlete, having long practices, being tired and still doing homework. We do work but not a lot of homework, but that might change [sic] since football is over.

Mark mentioned feeling a sense of belonging with this teacher because she recognized his contribution to the school through sports and that she attended many of the games to support her students in different sports, but football was her favorite. This meant a lot to Mark; he interpreted her interest in him as an athlete as sign of her caring. Mark perceived her sensitivity to their football team practice and game schedules as a sign of her concern and was appreciative. She often made time in class to talk or write about extracurricular activities, and the athletes were encouraged to keep a sports journal; if they wanted to share it with her, she collected them and made comments before returning them. Mark stated that her personal interest made him want to make her proud
of him in class. He explained, “She tells me things like, I can do it and I gotta get prepared for college.” The attention she gave to the students and the meaningful activities that took place outside of the classroom had classroom benefits. According to six of the nine students, the care that was shown by their favorite teachers, regarding their sports and other interests, encouraged them to do their homework and participate in class. These caring teachers appeared to have a relational approach to teaching that created a learning environment. As a result, the participants’ self-respect and academic self image improved. The relational approach provided motivation for academic engagement for participants that resulted in above average grades in that particular class.

Although Mark struggled with English, his relationship with his favorite teacher positively affected his academic engagement and performance, “I like it [learning in this class], it’s not boring but I struggle with vocabulary ‘cuz there was a lot of words that I never heard before.” When he discussed his interactions in class, Mark expressed a level of comfort that allowed him to asked questions in this class, although he described himself as shy. However, he reported that he answers questions in other classes “only when the teacher calls on me.” This, however, was very different from his interactions in his favorite class. In an effort to stay on top of his assignments, Mark took advantage of the open door policy that his teacher had during lunch and after school. As a result, his classroom engagement increased along with his academic performance. Mark was earning a B in the class at the time of the interview. Mark did not appear satisfied with his grade and offered an explanation, “I’m getting a B because I need to study for the tests more and I can do that now that football season is over.” Mark pointed out that the opportunity to get additional help after school is not offered by every teacher. Although
this student required additional help outside of the classroom to be successful, he did not interpret the availability of the teacher as part of her assignment.

John

John’s favorite teacher was one who also established a caring relationship with him. Although, he took a long pause before saying her name, a big smile preceded. He mentioned that he had this teacher every year in high school except his junior year. When asked why she was his favorite teacher, his answers were not related to academics: “She just put up with a lot from my freshman year until now.” He expressed gratitude for her patience and “never giving up” on him. He acknowledged that he was a different student his freshman year than he was at the time of the interview. He attributed his attitude towards math to his relationship with his favorite teacher: “I learned a lot, learned everything about math from her.”

His freshman year, he failed math; however, he managed to pass math his sophomore year, but the grades were below average. John stated that his teacher was teaching him two years of math during this one-year, and he had to work hard to pass the class. He failed math his junior year and is retaking it with his favorite teacher as a senior and is earning a C. John recognized the uniqueness of this teacher: “She does lectures and she is actually weird, because, you know, a lot of teachers don’t have time to explain to each and every individual student if they need help, but she does.” He continued to express his amazement by stating, “I don’t know how she does it, but she does it, and yeah, so basically everyone in the class is getting something out of it is what it seems like to me.” John has this teacher twice this year, one period for math and the other as a teachers’ assistant. He mentioned that he was surprised when the teacher
approached him about being her assistant, and he confessed that he thinks the reason is so she can keep an eye on him; this statement was communicated with a big smile. John persevered because of a caring and supporting teacher.

**Paul**

Similar to Matthew, Mark, and Johns’ relationships with their teachers, Paul’s relationship with his favorite teacher was initiated by the teacher. He, too, spoke with a smile on his face while discussing his favorite teacher. He mentioned the influence of this teacher with conviction. The difference between Pauls’ favorite teacher and the other favorite teachers was that this teacher was an African American male. According to Paul, the teacher was concerned with his supposed careless attitude and invited Paul to stop by and see him during lunch one day. Paul described the interaction with his teacher by stating, “He’s opened my eyes to a lot of things I would never think was true or people wouldn’t tell me.” Paul interpreted the teacher’s actions as caring. He expressed that he was surprised that he and his teacher had similar family experiences.

It was this personal connection that motivated Paul to do better in this particular class. Paul began to laugh while trying to express his thoughts about the class, “I like learning in this class because it’s a lot of fun, but besides a lot of fun it gets serious and you learn more than about just what’s in the class.” This was not Pauls’ perspective of the class prior to the lunch conversation with this teacher. Paul began to describe the process of how his perspective about improving his life changed.

He kind of told me his background story, which a lot of teachers don’t really tell you and so learning about him being, you know, in the projects and what not and
how it sort of related to me because I was in the projects at one time and how he made it out, it makes you wanna [sic] make it out.

Paul was earning the first A in his high school career; this academic engagement was a bi-product of a relationship developed and initiated by a caring teacher who happened to be African American.

The relationship with Paul’s favorite teacher was similar to other student participants in the study in that he cared about him personally. However, Paul related to his favorite teacher on the bases of his similar racial experiences, which was critical to influencing his academic engagement and performance. For example, Paul stated that after the lunch meeting with his teacher, he not only felt better about himself, but was also motivated to do better in this particular class. The other participants met their favorite teachers earlier in their high school careers and were able to benefit not only from the relationships but also from the academic impact of those relationships on their school performance. Paul has experienced a lot of school failure, but one teacher has managed to develop a caring relationship with him that has reinforced his racial identity and influenced his academic attitude and performance. If this student is to be successful, he will need additional support to help him transition from high school and find positive options for his future; this support may come from a local mentoring program or a relationship with a caring adult who can serve as a role model and give him some academic guidance.

Silas

Silas also described his favorite teacher as one who cared about him as a person. He mentioned several talks before and after class when the teacher addressed several
issues, namely, the choices he made regarding friends. Silas reported that in an effort to change his peer group, he began to spend time in tutoring with this teacher after school. This was the time he was spending with the wrong friends. The caring teacher-student relationship that developed as a result of the initiatives taken by this teacher improved his decision-making skills. When asked why this teacher was Silas’ favorite, he stated, “She’s my favorite teacher because she taught me how to stay out of trouble, different paths to succeed.” Silas explained further, “She taught me what’s right and what’s wrong, and like what to do in school and how to motivate me.” This student reported spending time with the teacher after school occasionally and reported that the conversations varied from sports, other classes he was taking, college life and sometimes U.S. History, which was the subject she taught him. When asked how he felt about learning in this class, Silas reported, “Well, at first I didn’t really care and then she, like, pep talked me, what I have to do to succeed, that’s what made me want to change.” The student reported becoming more engaged by participating in class discussions, asking and answering questions and learning the material. His final grade in the class was an “A”.

Similar to the other four participants, Silas’ relationship with a caring teacher yielded academic results, such as increased engagement and academic performance. When asked about his motivation for earning the A, Silas responded, “I think it would have to be her talks.” This student had this rich experience his freshman year, and he is the only one of three freshmen who had never failed a class, perhaps, partly due to this relationship with his favorite teacher. This teacher has kept track of Silas by maintaining relationships with his other social science teachers and by having him as her teacher’s assistant for one period.
David

David’s favorite teacher’s teaching approach or style helped David to develop a positive relationship with her. As he put it, “she actually teaches us. She’s not mean about it. She actually relates to kids to where like they enjoy learning from her.” He mentioned all of the different ways that his teacher would teach her subject and the interesting projects that were created during class: “The way the format that she taught us in helped us understand the work, but it also made it fun for us to actually learn the way she was teaching us.” David’s relationship with his favorite teacher did not appear to be as personal as the others; however, he described her as caring. David described the relationship by stating, “She spent individual time with me a little bit before the last period because I have basketball period so I had time to learn with her, learn more work.”

In addition to being academically engaged, his academic performance in social studies improved. The previous year, he earned a D in social studies, but, according to his transcript, he has maintained a B-plus average for the last two years. This was his World Civilization teacher, and now David wants to major in History.

Student Summary

Of the nine participants, three reported not having a favorite teacher and they all gave general responses when asked why. Their responses suggested they had not given this question much thought as none of them had a specific reason. Silas stated, “They all teach the same.” I later placed a phone call to clarify Silas’ statement of, “They all teach the same.” He reported, “Like all the teachers do the same stuff and teach the same way, there’s nothing like that stands out about them. So how can one be my favorite?” Another participant revealed, “That’s they job to teach, I don’t think they wanna be
anybody’s favorite.” These three had very different classroom experiences than the six with a favorite teacher.

In summary, all grades earned in the class of favorite teachers were “B” or better (3 A’s & 3 B’s). It appears that caring relationships with teachers not only influenced academic performance but participants stated that there was also an increase in academic engagement. The six students who had favorite teachers reported they increased their classroom participation through asking and answering questions in class. The caring teachers, who were considered favorites, demonstrated their concern in a manner that the students understood. These favorite teachers’ actions were interpreted by the students as caring ones, and this was a consistent theme throughout all of these student-teacher relationships that influenced academic attitude, engagement, and performance. Although not articulated, it was evident that the teachers had high expectations of the participants. The teachers demonstrated caring on two levels: giving the students personal attention and caring about the students’ learning. Also, the teachers who were identified as favorite appeared to have a teaching style or teaching approach that resulted in student learning. In addition to caring about the student as a person and student learning, these teachers apparently had the teaching ability that facilitated student learning, as described by the students. When asked the race of their favorite teacher, the participants identified three of the four teachers as African American.

According to five of the six participants who reported having a favorite teacher, their increased participation in class was reflected in asking and answering questions. John commented on the difference in his relationship with the only Black male teacher. He said this with a big smile and excitement in his voice: “It was definitely different, it
was more on a … it was way more on a personal level than a teacher-student level, you know, because he knew a lot of my family so he’s like a, [short pause], I guess you could say like an uncle.” Paul had this same teacher for a different class and stated, “we should definitely have more Black teachers at our school, that’s for sure, because Mr. Brown is one of my favorite teachers and I actually learned a lot just about life from him. John, like Paul, received the only A on his transcript from this teacher. Mark commented on the experience with his Black female teacher,

I had one Black teacher and that was really cool, she understood me and it was like we was family, she was hard on me but in a way like she talk to me like she was my aunt or something, she thought I was smart and told me I could always do better, no but sometimes she accepted my work and just said good job, she was cool, not like my friend or nothing but just a good teacher. I think there should be more Black teachers in our school cuz they understand Black students in a different way than other teachers, yeah, we need more.

**Student-Teacher Relationships and Student Performance**

When each of the six students with favorite teachers were asked if they had ever failed a class during high school, four of the six students said yes. Six of nine students failed a course in the ninth grade. When I asked each student to describe their relationship with the teacher of the course they failed, each of them gave different answers. One thing they all had in common was they blamed themselves and not the teacher for failing the course. Matthew listed specific personal factors that contributed to his failing grades:
I failed my algebra class and my English class. I know why it happened. It happened because I failed the term three and term four and that was after football was over and we didn’t have grade checks anymore and I really didn’t like my English or my Algebra class so I took it for granted and like thought I have three more years, why is my freshman year going to count. So I slacked off. I didn’t care. That’s why I got those F’s.

Another student confessed, with a look of disappointment, “I was ditching class.” Paul hesitated before giving his explanation for one of the classes he failed:

Because like I just don’t feel comfortable talking to some of my teachers and they don’t look like they really wanna talk to me either, so I just show up but like I wouldn’t do any work cuz like I didn’t understand anything.

The fourth student explained “Math was just something I . . . it’s not one of my greatest subjects. My teacher was a nice lady. She actually took the time to teach us, but I just didn’t understand it. She was a good teacher though.” According to Samuel, the interactions with this teacher were minimal. By comparison, the students’ positive relationships with their favorite teachers seemed to influence their academic engagement and performance.

I asked the students to describe what I would see if I observed them in a class other than the one with their favorite teacher. Their responses were similar. One student explained, “Well, you would see me bored, looking around at the class and probably looking at the clock every five minutes, waiting for the bell to ring.” Another student added, “Uh, [long pause] you would see me sitting there listening to the teacher bored to death.” David responded, “You’ll see me probably really quiet and doing my work.”
Another student mentioned, “You would see me trying really hard just to pay attention and do some work just to stay occupied.” The common denominator for all of these participants’ responses was a lack of interaction with the teacher and student engagement. Their interactions in and attitudes regarding some of their other classes were vastly different from the classes taught by their favorite teachers, where they each experienced the most academic success. Even though the students’ blame themselves, their academic failure suggests that teachers’ teaching approach or lack of establishing caring relationships with the student participants also contributed to these students not achieving.

**Student Perceptions of Other Teachers**

All of the students were asked to describe their relationships with their other teachers, and their responses were very different from those describing their relationships with their favorite teachers. There were no signs of meaningful relationships other than those with their favorite teachers and the students appeared to have adjusted to this fact. Matthew selected his words carefully when he described his relationships with other teachers:

Most of my teachers are good teachers, they [long pause] a few of them will go into depth to help you out, but a lot of them basically just read you off the standards and pitch you the lesson and then hope you get it, but there’s some of my teachers who will do all that and then, you know, solve the problem with you over and over again so you know how to do it. Yeah, that, most of them aren’t too in depth with you, the student.
One student recounted, “My relationships with my teachers are ok, I sit in class, do my work and speak only when spoken to, I’m not a trouble maker, so yeah I think my relationships are good.” The other seven students gave similar responses; their responses indicated that their relationships ranged from “normal, nothing special.” to “your typical teacher-student relationship.”

Six of the nine students, who were athletes, credited going to college as their motivation for doing well in their other classes; the other three, who were non-athletes, identified graduation from high school as their motivation. Samuel mentioned that science is the hardest subject for him, and, although he had never failed a class, science is always challenging. When asked to describe his relationship with his science teacher, he stated,

We don’t, I don’t really talk to her. We don’t really have a bond or nothing like that, it’s just ok, do the assignment, turn it in, see you tomorrow. Take notes, take the quiz, take the tests. That’s it. Everything’s just straightforward, move on.

Fortunately, all of these students found something outside of the classroom, such as graduating high school or moving onto college, to motivate them to do well in their classes.

Each student was also asked how their teachers would describe them. All of the descriptions were positive. There was a range of responses, including shy, quiet, funny, class clown, hard working, talkative, and a good student. All of the students said they would agree with the description of the teacher. None of the students expressed any animosity toward their teachers when describing them. They did not report any negative
views held by teachers about them either, yet the caring relationships that were developed between the participants and their many teachers were few.

Race and Curriculum

This section addresses the third and final theme that emerged from the main research questions. Since all of the participants were African American male, understanding their perception of the significance of race in regards to school belonging was essential. Student perceptions of themselves as teachers of African American males and students’ perceptions of race and school performance were the two related sub-themes. In the first sub-theme, participants describe how they would interact with African American males students if they were the teacher. This topic was addressed in the interview protocol in an effort to discover what participants would consider important qualities and/or strategies for relating to Black male high school students. The second sub-theme participants discussed the role of race in regards to their academic performance.

Interview questions revealed the perceptions of participants regarding the absence of race in the curriculum. Seven of the nine students reported that they never had a discussion in class regarding a positive contribution made to society by an African American. One student acknowledged having this experience, while another student reported that this had only happened “once.” The responses to how they felt about this fact varied. Three of the nine students appeared apathetic in their responses. Mark commented, “I don’t think I’m affected, cuz it’s always been that way all of my school years.” Similar to Mark, Luke declared, with a blank face, “It doesn’t.” Timothy reported that he was used to it, the lack of positive discussions about his race. Mark’s
disposition on this question was similar to John’s, while shaking his head from side to side, he simply stated, “It’s always been this way, I don’t feel nothing.” Paul did not recall if this had ever happened. John, quietly and without much emotion, stated, “I think they should teach more about African Americans.” However, Matthew had a different perspective; while making eye-to-eye contact with me, he expressed, “It’s wrong, like all I can say is [long pause], it’s just wrong.” Silas, like Matthew, expressed strong emotions, “In my opinion it says we’re not important enough to talk about at school.”

Their responses were interestingly different; some students had very little to say, appearing to recognize the fact that “this is just the way things are” and thus recognizing the status quo aspect of education, while others voiced their dissatisfaction.

Six of the nine students reported never having an assignment or a lesson that focused on African Americans in particular. Seven of nine students reported never reading a book in school about their race. Their feelings regarding this were just as strong as their feelings regarding not having any positive discussions about African Americans. A few elaborated on their answers. One of the students, who reported reading a section of a book that included African Americans, stated, “It’s good and bad cuz it felt like the whole class was looking at me, so like I was glad that we was reading it, but it was bad feeling everybody eyes on me.” Matthew paused and looked up to the ceiling for a few seconds before his statement: “Never have assignments about my race. And I read books about my race, but like my teachers never in all years of school have never assigned me a book about my race but I have read a couple books on my own about it and read online about it, watched TV programs about it, but it’s never in the school curriculum.” When asked how he felt about this fact, he continued:
I mean, we are a very important part of this nation. I’m just going to use one example. If you look back on inventions, Black people invented a lot of important things like in the past so just that alone should tell you that we’re important and it’s sad that there’s not one – there’s not even a class like African American studies. It could be, I don’t see why that couldn’t be an elective, like we have cooking class, we have yarn class, all that stuff but we don’t have an African American culture class, something like that. We don’t have anything like that. Kind of feels like we’re being ignored, like we’re not, you know, getting the recognition that we deserve and I really don’t know why.

Five of the nine students reported having one teacher that was African American. Their responses to this question were interesting; three of the students seemed to have never really given this fact any thought. As a matter of fact, one student did say that he had never really thought about it. Four of the six students that had a Black teacher stated that there should be more Black teachers. The fifth student explained, “I think this [only having one Black teacher] is bad because there are a lot of teachers at my school.” The sixth student reported, “If I had more Black teachers, again I’d be a little bit more influenced about my culture.” One student, however, commented on the influence of his football buddy:

Ms. Temple [pseudonym], who is African American, I’ve had her for, you know, when you’re here varsity football, you get assigned a staff member, a football buddy and that’s someone you go to, you know, when you just want to talk when you’re just having trouble with something, like a mentor and I got assigned to her my junior year. And just in these two years we—I’ve learned so much from her,
she’s one of those, she’s one of those people who like in the Black culture, she’s like the grandma you go and talk to and she gives you all these wise quotes. So that’s the role she plays in my life, like I’ll go to her and she give me a bunch of advice and pat me on the back and just make me smile.

There were three students who had never had a Black teacher. Their responses indicated that they had not given this fact much thought.

**Student Perceptions of Themselves as Teachers of African American Males**

None of the participants thought there was anything their teachers could do to help them feel connected; their answers were the same regarding the principal, except for one student’s answer. He thought that the principal could help if he put more of them, i.e., Black male students, in the same class so they would feel comfortable. Although the majority of the participants could not list anything the teachers or principal could do to help them feel more connected, when they were asked how they would interact with Black male students if the roles were reversed, that is if the participants were a teacher or principal, their responses were informative. Each student was asked to imagine being on stage, addressing the teachers at their school that teach Black boys. One student was not sure what he would say. Another student said he would say, “Don’t pick on us so much,” and then said, “I would probably tell them to help us with tutors or something to find us a way to where we could understand everything. We need help to get further in life.” The other six did not have statements; instead they had questions: Matthew reported feeling overlooked and ignored; he wanted teachers to identify what Black students were doing wrong.
Matthew: “I’d just ask them what are we doing wrong to not be recognized more in the school?”

Mark had several questions; he reported being confused about not learning about his culture. He also stated that most teachers do not think Black boys are smart nor take the time to get to know them. He stated, “I would just ask them why they don’t teach good stuff about Black people, why they don’t think we can be smart, why they don’t take the time to get to know us?”

Luke reported that he wanted teachers to be fair when teaching Black boys and his questions were reflective, “I’d ask them how are you teaching them [Black male students], what are you teaching them, are you teaching them the same stuff everybody else is learning?”

John questioned how the current teachers would respond to more Black teachers and students and his questions addressed his concern, “Could we have more Black teachers and students at school?”

Timothy said that race topics do not come up with teachers and his questions were directly related to his concern, “I would ask how the Black students act in their class and how do they feel teaching them?”

David’s question may sound harsh to some, but during the interview, his facial expressions and tone suggested he was sincere, “Why do they judge Black people before they even know them?”

The majority of the students wanted answers from some of the teachers; they could not think of any information that they wanted to share, as the principal, with their school’s
teachers. This question caused the participants to pause the longest before answering and was the most difficult for them to answer.

All of the students were able to address this question from a different angle when they were asked to imagine themselves as the teacher and list what they would do with or for African American male students in their classes. All of their answers were relationship centered. Matthew reported that he would interact with his students in a way that would build caring relationships; he even saw his role extend beyond the classroom. “I would make them feel appreciated. I would give them a lot chances to prove themselves. I’d just have a really really good friendship and relationship with them. I’d be that teacher that they could come talk to, but at the same time I won’t take it easy on them, you know. I’ll ask them let me see your grades, why do have a C or a D in this class? You need to get it up. So I’ll kind of play that father role because I know a lot of them don’t probably have a father role in their lives so I’d probably play that role.”

Mark, like Matthew described his interactions as a teacher in caring terms. He made statements of support coupled with accountability. “I would meet them at the door everyday and check on them. Talk to them about all their classes not just mine. I would ask them about other things other than school.”

Luke was consistent in his responses throughout the interview in regards to more exposure to his culture. He reported that if he were the teacher he would give something that he did not receive in school. “I would teach them about African American history.”

John too thought it was important to build relationships with his Black male students. Although he was not an athlete, he was close enough to them to identify the
benefits. “Ask them how they’re doing in school and if they needed help with anything. And if they weren’t playing sports, I’d ask them why not?”

Paul struggled academically and he described his interactions with Black students in one sentence. “I would help put work in terms that they would know and try to encourage them.”

Timothy described his interactions in very similar terms as the above participants. He too mentioned that he would offer students support along with accountability. “That’s a good question [short pause]. I’d make sure they’re doing what they are suppose to do so they could achieve goals, what’s right, what’s wrong, what’s cool, what’s not, and how to stay out of kid drama don’t call, no judge people on their skin color. There’s more that I had in my head but I just can’t say it. I just can’t [long pause] I think I would help them learn more than other people so they could achieve more. I would tell them to achieve your goals instead of doing what people says Black people do being lazy and all that stuff they say about but I want you to be the opposite.”

Silas saw a need to be harder on Black males, but it was coupled with support as well. He like other participants stressed being available to the students. “I would help them a little bit more because I want to see African Americans be successful and I would be more strict just because sometimes they [teachers] need to be, you know, they need to be like that. I would just give them extra help, just answering all their questions, before school, after school help, tutoring, a lot of individual help, just stuff like that, just to make sure they know, to understand what I’m talking about.”

Samuel described his role with his students in similar terms as the other participants and added that he would involve the parents. “I would be a little harder on
them when they didn’t get their work done. I would ask them if it was because they didn’t understand it or they just didn’t want to do it? If they didn’t understand it, I would make them come back and see me after school or something, if they didn’t want to do it, I would call home or tell a coach if they played a sport.”

David spoke in terms outside of school. He mentioned encouraging his students in a different way. “I would take them out to colleges to see what college life is like and motivate them to get good grades.”

Interestingly, when participants were asked to identify what teachers and the principal could do to help them feel a sense of belonging, they replied “nothing”. Yet, when they were able to describe the type of teacher and principal they would be, they were able to communicate it clearly. In all of their statements, there actions are intentional and supportive. The interactive, personal and caring learning environment they described would be considered culturally relevant some researchers.

**Students Perceptions of Race and School Performance**

Four of nine students reported that being African American and male influences their school performance. Matthew described his thoughts on the subject by sharing,

I feel like I’m like, I’m inclined to do better just because I’m Black so like I’ll go back to the AP class [referenced earlier], like I kind of knew there wasn’t going to be a lot of Black people in class so I thought, Okay, I’m Black, I got to study and be a.. good... You know good, what’s the word? Example from my race. I’m going to try even harder. So I could use that quote basically as my life story in school for the past three or four years, I gotta try harder because I’m Black.
Mark had similar thoughts, “Yeah, sometimes, it makes me work harder because people don’t think we smart.” Samuel remarked:

**Being African American makes me want to work harder because it’s going to make a difference in my life, it’s going to make a difference maybe ten years from now because [pause] I’m going to be doing something special or something good.**

David had similar feelings as the others: “A lot of people don’t see us Black people as being smart so you do good it proves them wrong, that’s another thing that motivates me and it just feels good to get good grades also and feel up there with other ethnicities.”

Many of the participants spoke openly about their feelings regarding being “the only one” in their classrooms. When discussing the idea of having more Black males attend Temple High, many responded that it would be positive because they would be able to relate to more people and have opportunities to hang out with more people of their race. One even mentioned that if he were the principal he would put more Blacks in the same class in order to help them feel more comfortable. Mark elaborated on his thoughts by saying,

“ I have Mexican friends, Asian friends, White friends and of course Black friends, so I’m cool with everybody, it would just be nice to have more people who like eat the same stuff you eat and do the same stuff to they hair, you know just relate. But, that don’t really happen in class and sometimes, it’s like lonely. If there was more of us, we could like remind each other about tests and stuff and work together when it was like time for groups. but I just kinda mind my own business in class.”
Although there were varying degrees of school belonging among the participants, all of them felt they belonged to something. The athletes expressed a sense of belonging to their team and the non-athletes to their peers. The students, with favorite teachers, also expressed a sense of belonging in that classroom. It was apparent, in this study, that the existence of belonging influenced the attitudes and actions of some of the participants. More specifically, the teacher-students relationship tended to influence their academic experience. The athletes experienced a larger social network group than non-athletes that included peers as well as adults. The statements from participants and final grades in class with favorite teacher indicated increased academic performance. However, there was no evidence that the participants made a correlation between their relationship with teachers and their academic engagement and performance. All of the participants expressed that more cultural representation in the school curriculum along with more African American males would increase their sense of school belonging.

Three of the participants were seniors and six were juniors. During the time of the interview, the participants had between 30 and 40 teachers, considering they have six teachers per semester, some were duplicated for year-long courses. Nevertheless, only six of the nine identified a favorite teacher who made an impact on them personally and academically. The teachers who were engaging and caring appeared to demonstrate cultural relevancy in a manner that yielded an increase in academic performance in that particular class.
Chapter 5

Discussions, Implications, Future Research

This chapter contains a detailed discussion of the findings from the study that was presented in Chapter 4. The discussion in the previous chapter focused on the themes of school belonging that arose from interviews with nine African American males at Temple High School. The discussion also focused on how these students’ perceptions of experiences and relationships with their teachers influenced their academic engagement.

This chapter begins with a brief summary of the study as well as an overview of the problem, methodology, and limitations of the study. This chapter will also review the results of this study in relation to the research questions. This chapter analyzes, interprets and synthesizes the findings in the previous chapter. In addition, this chapter explores the implications these findings have on policy and practice, including professional development, and closes with recommendations for further research.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of African American high school males regarding their sense of school belonging and to determine whether or not their perceptions influenced their academic engagement. This study’s goal was to provide educators with a better understanding of the differences in school belonging experienced by African American high school males and how that sense of belonging contributed to their academic engagement and performance. Through this understanding, it was also my goal that educators would see the need for and develop appropriate, relevant, and effective professional development programs that will result in adequately meeting the needs of African American male high school students. Once educators meet these needs, the ultimate goal would be for these students not only to develop a stronger
sense of school belonging but also to experience educational success through academic achievement.

This qualitative research study used the case study methodology, which included a purposeful sample of nine African American male high school students in grades 11 and 12. I obtained data from nine in-depth interviews and document reviews, which included the participants’ official transcripts and test histories. I used coding as the method for analyzing the data in order to identify common themes relative to the research questions. Chapter 4 presented findings that were organized around the research question and sub-questions by addressing the students’ perception of school connections, their relationship with their teachers, academic engagement and performance as well as the perceived lack of African American culture in the public school curriculum.

**Themes and Findings**

Four themes emerged from this study regarding school belonging, student identification with particular staff members, and culture within the curriculum. The emergent themes are as follows:

1. The participants had different experiences of school belonging and there was a noticeable difference between the educational experience of the athletes and non-athletes.
2. The participants who identified a particular teacher as their “favorite”, felt that teacher influenced their academic engagement and classroom participation. Also, their academic performance improved in their favorite teacher’s classroom.
3. The participants expressed a desire for their race to be included in the curriculum.
4. Participants expressed different views regarding the role of race in their academic environment and performance.

This study’s main finding was that caring teacher-student relationships seemed to result in improved student academic engagement and performance. This finding is consistent with the research of both Noddings (2001) and Ladson-Billings (2003). For example, when students interpreted a teacher’s actions to be caring, it influenced their academic engagement in that particular classroom. In some cases, the influence of this particular relationship altered the student’s overall attitude towards academics and school. As exemplified by Matthew who stated, “Now, I actually like school, I like learning, I like being in the classroom and interacting with the teacher and having intelligent conversations with the teacher, so yeah, she [his favorite teacher] changed me.” Some participants articulated their excitement about learning and gave examples of their learning; some were even motivated to sustain and strengthen their newfound senses of self-efficacy about learning. Silas, a senior, had his favorite teacher his sophomore year and was so proud of his academic accomplishments that he stated,

“I probably get a transcript like two or three times a month just to see what my grades are even though they really don’t changed, I just like looking at my transcripts.” Conversely, the participants’ relationships with other teachers were not as positive and did not yield the same positive academic results, such as engaging learning experiences and above average grades. Many of the participants were disconnected from their other teachers and the subject matter they taught. This was not only evident when participants described their interactions with other teachers, but also evident in the lack of classroom participation they self-reported. The interviews also revealed that many of the students
did not expect positive teacher-student relationships and perceived the rarity of these kinds of relationships as normal. Another findings also included the difference in school belonging that the athlete participants felt, depending on whether or not their sport was in season. There were obvious differences in school experiences, such as in academic support for athletes versus non-athletes. Furthermore, this study found that the African American male athlete participants had a better chance of continuing education at a college or university than the African American male students who were not athletes. Additionally, this study found that the participants had similar feelings regarding the lack of representations of their culture and race in their curriculum.

The discussion in the following sections incorporate the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, with a focus on school belonging and its influence on academic engagement in an effort to interpret the following key findings: (a) African American male high school students’ perceptions of their school belonging, (b) their perceptions of and interactions with their teachers, and (c) their feelings regarding the lack of representations of their culture in the curriculum. For the purpose of this study, connectedness falls under the umbrella of the operationalized definition of belonging.

**Students’ Perceptions of their School**

Overall, the participants shared positive perceptions of Temple High. Their remarks ranged from optimistic descriptions of peers to general remarks about the competitive history of the sports program. All participants stated that socializing was their favorite thing to do at school. All mentioned positive experiences with their peers and looked forward to meeting with their same group every day. For some, their perception of their school belonging was strongly connected to their satisfaction with
their peer group. When the participants were asked questions that referenced their school, most of their responses indicated that they defined school more as social setting; a few referenced the size of the school. Once descriptions were given of their school, questions regarding school belonging were introduced.

For most of the participants, school belonging was different. Some felt a sense of belonging because of the students they knew; some experienced a sense of belonging because of the sport they played. Others did not feel they belonged at all. The participants who were athletes showed signs of belonging to their team. However, one athlete, Matthew, pointed out that he did not feel a sense of belonging at all after football season. This student as well as the other eight participants was not active in any other school activities or groups. The athlete participants hung out together every day during break and lunch, and according to the participants, this was their safe space. It was familiar, and it was understood by the students and faculty that this space belonged to them.

**Students’ Perceptions of Their Relationships and Interactions with Their Teachers**

The environments that are created by successful teachers of African American students are relational and personal (Kurger & Love, 2005; Ladson Billings, 1994). The relational and personal environments that were created for the participants, by their favorite teachers, created a foundation for academic engagement. Creating environments that include high expectations of caring relationships with, and respectful treatment of students are strategies that Ladson-Billings (1994) identifies, which are used by successful teachers of African American students. The six participants who acknowledged having a favorite teacher commented on the caring interactions they had
with that particular teacher. The participants in the study attributed their improved classroom participation to the motivation to learn that was ignited by their favorite teacher.

**Caring as a Component of Belonging**

The participants’ motivation to learn and engage appeared to be bi-products of the positive relationships initiated by these teachers. Noddings (2001) refers to this type of relationship as *caring*. All of the students, who reported having a favorite teacher, interpreted the actions of the teacher as caring. According to the participants, encouragement from their favorite teachers not only inspired them with a desire to academically engage but also helped them to build a sense of academic confidence. As Matthew declared,

“Like in English class, I’ll probably come off as a shy, quiet kid but now when it’s time for me to stand up and talk to the class or present something or read out loud I’ll confront it with power and that’ how I am now.”

In each case, the student participants’ academic performance improved as a result.

The caring relationship that was facilitated by these teachers appeared to influence the learning experiences of the student participants in a way that inspired them to engage and excel. Learning, motivation, and encouragement are maximized when the need to belong is met (Becker & Luthar, 2003; Dewey, 1958; Fredriks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Noddings, 1992; Osterman, 2000). The participants, who expressed a sense of belonging in their favorite teachers’ classroom, seemed to stem from the student’s perceptions that their teacher cared for them.
Matthew, Mark and John stated that their favorite teacher consistently expressed confidence in their academic abilities. The students in the current study were active participants in their favorite teachers’ classroom; they spoke of having confidence when they raised their hands, asking and answering questions, and contributing to class discussions. The focus of this study was academic performance rather than achievement, nevertheless, the data showed that when participants failed or struggled academically in a particular class, an element of care was missing from their relationship with that particular teacher and as reported by the participants there was a decline in class participation and performance. Findings such as those detailed in the previous chapter seem to suggest that teacher caring may be a necessary component to creating an environment where the sample population was willing to participate. Voelkl (1991) argues that there is a significant relationship between participation and achievement. If the findings of Voelkl (1991) are examined in the context of the findings of the current study, it may provide some insight as to why students in the study performed better in the classrooms where they perceived the teacher as taking a personal interest in them as students.

According to the six participants, there was a sense of belonging with their favorite teachers’ classroom. For instance, Matthew reported that his favorite teacher shared a life-changing experience with the class when she explained her open-heart surgery and all of the complications that followed. He stated that she told the class that her story is just one example of perseverance and assured them of the success they could look forward to if they embraced challenges and worked hard. This sharing of personal information set the tone for the class and several students reported feeling connected to
the teacher as a result because, as Mark stated, “Teachers don’t hardly tell you things about themselves.” The motives behind the teachers’ willingness to open up to their students are unknown, but the resultant caring relationships with participants were followed by above average grades – A’s and B’s. For example, Matthew stated that he did not like school much during his freshman year and that he liked it even less after football season ended; however, he stated that his favorite teacher helped to change his perspective about school.

The participants in this study also expressed pride in earning above average grades on assignments, quizzes, and tests; however, these same students described their experiences in other classes differently. Some reported only answering questions when they were called upon; others stated that they would answer only if they were sure they had the right answer. For these participants, the lack of engagement negatively influenced their academic performance. Within these same classrooms, the perceived lack of caring student-teacher relationships as described by the students, appeared to affect the students’ attitudes regarding engagement as well as their academic confidence in the classroom. According to Timothy and other student participants, the learning environments in the other teachers’ classrooms were not conducive to their participating freely. When Timothy was asked why he did not participate in other classrooms, he responded, “Honestly, too shy or embarrassed to raise my hand to ask for help or I feel that I might get judged or something.” From the participants’ perspective, participation appeared to involve taking a when school belonging was lacking. In this current study, student participation, which is often referred to as engagement, was sparked by a teacher’s warmth and caring.
Noddings (2005) argues that environments with caring teachers help children to flourish. The participants in this study, who had a favorite teacher, experienced a combination of belonging in their favorite teacher’s classroom and a sense of caring on their teacher’s behalf. These phenomena influenced the students’ regarding the subject matter and their academic ability. Anderman (2002) states that there is a positive correlation between belonging and academic performance. Two of the students earned their first “A” in their high school history in the class with their favorite teacher. They credited the encouragement they received from each of their favorite teachers as the impetus for their academic performance. Where a caring teacher-student relationship existed, academic engagement followed. As a result, these students were able to experience academic success in courses that they previously considered their least favorite.

**Belonging Through Intentional Inclusion in Instruction**

One of the more surprising findings in this study was three of the participants stated that their favorite teacher taught their least favorite subject, yet they all received grades of B or better, and their attitudes regarding the subject matter also changed. Their favorite teachers’ approach to learning was mentioned by several students during the interview. Silas asserted, “Her way of approaching the lesson was a lot better than I had had before.” Samuel stated, “We worked in groups, she taught us how to help each other.” While these participants were pleased with their end of year course grades, they spoke more about how it felt to learn in this particular class. Mark exclaimed,
“I paid attention in her class cuz she thought I was smart and it felt good to get asked questions and know the answers and I knew what to study for to make good grades on tests, yeah, she made me feel smart in class.”

The above student comment is consistent with Cornell and Wellborn (1991) research, suggesting that when students perceive that their teachers view them as academically capable, they respond by demonstrating advanced levels of achievement. For instance, Matthew expressed that English was his “worse” subject because he struggled with writing, but after the experience with his favorite teacher, who taught his least favorite subject in tenth grade, he was placed in AP English (in 12th grade), enjoyed the challenge of writing essays, and was earning an A minus at the time of interview. The students’ success in what was previously his most challenging subject was the bi-product of a caring teacher-student relationship coupled with what seemed to be effective teaching strategies. Matthew not only earned above average grades but also scored advanced on the state test in English Language Arts the previous year.

This study suggests that strategies to close the achievement gap for Black males should include relationship building and culturally relevant teaching. Although the favorite teachers were successful in developing positive relationships with their students through caring, caring alone is not enough to yield the academic success that is needed. Teachers must couple academic rigor, high expectations, and effective teaching strategies, with caring teacher relationships to facilitate learning as a way to begin to close the achievement gap for African American males.

Those teachers who took the time and made the student himself as well as his learning a priority impacted the participant’s academic lives. Fine (1991) argues that
when students perceive their teachers as supportive and encouraging, the students’ academic engagement and performance increases. In this study, the participation shown in each participant’s favorite teacher’s classroom suggests the same. The participants’ engagement was a response to teacher interaction. Noddings (2005) suggests that when a caring relationship is formed between teacher and student, the student often responds by becoming academically engaged. In other words, student learning is highly dependent upon the relationship that is established between student and teacher. Therefore, it is critical that teachers are aware of the important role they play in the academic outcomes for Black males by establishing caring relationships with them. According to the interview data, the participants’ relationships with the favorite teachers were frequent and consistent and intentionally maintained by the teachers.

Exemplary Black teachers teach in a manner that improves the academic and personal well-being of Black students (Ladson-Billings, 1994; 1995; Ladson-Billings & Henry, 1990; Perry & Delpit, 1998). Interestingly, three of the participants’ four favorite teachers in this study were Black. Each participant, who stated that they had a favorite teacher, gave examples of how the teachers expressed their academic and personal concern for them. In addition, each of the participants reported and their transcripts confirmed that they improved academically while they were enrolled in their favorite teacher’s course.

Ladson-Billings (1994) argues that because culturally relevant teachers are serious advocates for their students; the walls of their classrooms do not limit their advocacy. There is no evidence that the favorite teachers identified by participants in the current study were purposely implementing culturally relevant teaching methods;
however, their interactions with the student participants showed patterns similar to the types of culturally inclusive interactions found within the literature, such as those noted by Ladson-Billing (1994). An example of a teacher’s advocacy that extended beyond her classroom would be when one of Matthew’s favorite teachers stopped reading one of his essays in class to move him to AP English. Matthew explained that while the teacher was meeting with students individually, to give them feedback on their essays, he patiently waited for his turn. The teacher asked him if anyone had assisted him with his paper and after he replied “no”, she picked up the phone to call the AP English teacher in the middle of their conversation. Matthew was immediately placed in the AP class and the teacher personally completed the paperwork with the counselor later that day. This teacher recognized Matthews’ potential and was proactive about placing him in the most rigorous classroom. As mentioned before, there was no evidence in the study that these kinds of teacher actions were intentionally meant to address the needs of student in terms of advocacy; however, this particular teacher’s actions placed this student in a position for current and future opportunity by purposely including him in a higher track class. A less culturally relevant teacher may have kept the student in her own class and just let the student excel in a lower level class.

**Belonging as a Product of Student-Teacher Identification**

The participants also reported several instances where each of their favorite teachers showed an interest in them outside of the normal classroom hours or domain. For example, one of the teachers supported the athletes by attending their sporting events. Another teacher limited the amount of homework she gave them in order to gain buy-in from the students and get them to focus in class. Other favorite teachers inquired about
the participants’ academic status in other classes and, sometimes, made appointments with the students to give them extra help before or after school. Another teacher shared what it was like to grow up in the projects with one of his participants Paul, and he reported, “It let me know that if he can make it out of the projects, I can too.” This conversation was a turning point for Paul; he began to engage in this teacher’s class and earned his first A. The message that this student received from his favorite teacher was that he was not only concerned about Paul doing well in his classes but also concerned about Paul’s overall academic success and personal well-being.

Decision-making and developing a code of ethics or guiding principles is a critical life skill but may not necessarily be a part of school curriculum. Nevertheless, the participants’ favorite teachers understood the value of these skills as they relate to the overall development of these students. Silas, for instance, mentioned that his favorite teacher taught him “right from wrong.” Crandall (1981) found that an increase in student’s self-confidence and an enhanced sense of self-worth were bi-products of belonging. Some of the participants shared examples of how their teachers contributed to their increased self-confidence and self worth. For example, Mark stated that he believed his teacher really cared about him because of the interest she displayed in his sport and he reported feeling a “connection” with her early in the school year. Paul experienced an increase in self-confidence after Mr. Brown, who was also African American, shared past experiences that were very similar to Paul’s. As a result, he stated, “Mr. Brown, made me believe my life could change and I’m different in his class.” It appears that the combination of this teacher’s race, gender and cultural relevancy inspired motivation in a
student who had never previously earned a grade higher than a “C” in is high school history.

Jordan (2002) argues there is no substitute for teacher quality and it always trumps racial congruence. While I agree with Jordan that there is no substitute for teacher quality, I do not agree that it always trumps racial congruence. To argue that racial congruence is less important than teacher quality is to deny the critical role that race plays in education, particularly educating Black males. Jordan (2002) implies that race is not a major factor in teaching and learning. At Temple High, the student population is predominantly Hispanic; however, the staff is predominantly White. According to the Department of Education, 100% of the teachers at Temple High are “highly qualified”. Nevertheless, this study suggests that the group and individual identity of African American males are addressed when teachers implement strategies that Ladson-Billings (2005) refers to as culturally relevant. For example, three of the four favorite teachers were Black and one was not. However, it appears that the racial congruence between teachers and students played a significant role in the overall learning experience of the students. In addition to sharing the same race as the participants, these teachers were successful in supporting student learning. Some of the students reported that their other teachers were competent but it was not reflected in their learning experience. If a teacher is competent in their subject matter, but is unaware of how race affects teaching and learning, the Black male probably will continue to be left behind academically. The participants who reported having a favorite teacher also described a strong sense of belonging in their favorite teacher’s class as a result of their relationship.
It is important to mention that the current study discovered that most of the favorite teachers (three out of the four) shared the same race as the students and that the students seemed to excel academically within these teachers’ classrooms. This finding appears to suggest that student-teacher identification in terms of race may be a critical factor in the instruction of Black male high school students. However, the students seemed to also identify with another teacher, Mrs. McKarrel, who seemed to take a caring, personal interest with the students as people and making sure to provide access to their curriculum. She was not racially the same as the students, but seemed to exhibit some of the characteristics that Ladson-Billings (2005) identify as culturally relevant. The caring relationship also served as access to the curriculum. As will be discussed later within the chapter, a vein of future research could examine whether teacher quality as Jordan (2002) argues trumps race or whether coupled with racial sensitively, understanding, and knowledge contributes to the learning and academic achievement of African American high school male students.

**Same Students, Different Teachers, Different Engagement and Performance**

The importance of caring teacher-student relationships is not a new concept. Adler (1939) believed that feeling unconnected to the school community, to others in the school, and particularly to the teacher could usually explain school failure. Osterman (2000) argues that the primary members of a school community are teachers and students. Osterman (2000) further states that the need for belonging cannot be met without the student experiencing a level of attachment to the teacher. The data from this study also suggests that the most important element in feeling a sense of school belonging is the individual classroom experience that is influenced by the relationship created between
teacher and student. This teacher-student relationship highly influences the teaching and learning that occurs. In other words, this relationship determines the level of student’s expectation and support, as well as their engagement and performance.

Consistent with Osterman’s findings, six of the nine students in the present study failed at least one class their freshman year, and all of them reported not having a relationship with the teacher in the particular class that they failed. Bronfenbrenner (1979) identifies the dynamics between teacher and student as the primary instrument for learning and human development. The interaction between teacher and student determined or highly influenced student learning. The relationship with the teacher determined if the climate was positive or negative. It was evident in this study and others that the optimal learning environment is not created when there is little or no communication between the teacher and student (Grant, 1989; Haberman, 1989). There was a noticeable difference in the students’ engagement in each of their favorite teacher’s class versus their engagement in other teachers’ classrooms; the difference seemed to be in the quality of teachers’ relationship with their student. These differences not only were manifested in student engagement, but also were evident in student learning and academic performance, which were evidenced in students’ final grades. It is clear that other factors may be involved when students are not academically successful.

Taylor (1994) states that there is a significant relationship between achievement and engagement. In the absence of caring teachers, many of the participants earned average (C) and below average (D) grades and reported sitting in the classroom, watching the clock, and waiting for bell to ring. These same participants reported having insignificant relationships with teachers, other than their favorite teachers, that did not
include conversations. One student reported, for example, that he was failing science and had never had a conversation with his science teacher. He defined this relationship as a “typical teacher-student relationship”. When asked to describe this typical relationship, he added,

We don’t—I don’t really talk to her. We don’t have a bond or nothing like that, it’s just …okay, do the assignment, turn it in, see you tomorrow, take notes, take the quiz, take the test, that’s it. Everything is straightforward, move on.

Similarly, another participant failed math and reported that he had never spoken in class or with the teacher about anything. When Samuel was asked to describe his relationship with this particular teacher, he replied, “It’s your normal teacher relationship, nothing special.” The interview data reflected several similar comments made by the other participants in similar situations. These students appeared to have systematically experienced classroom practices and school cultures that have led them to conclude and accept that lack of caring relationships with teachers is the norm. Although this reality negatively impacts them as students, they have come to perceive it as the way it is.

Swanson et al. (2003) state youth often expect teachers and other staff to be supportive of their development; however, the participants in this study gave no indication of this sort of expectation. As a matter of fact, they appeared surprised when teachers took an interest in them and their learning and cared about them as individuals. One student expressed, “I don’t know how she does it, but she actually takes time to teach everyone and answer questions so that everybody gets to learn.” This statement of surprise may be a result of a phenomenon that Swanson (2003) suggests exists, that is when African American males do not receive positive academic reinforcement that
supports their individual goals and development, they may actively decide to not expect it from schools. In other words, maybe the participants once expected support from their teachers and this expectation gradually declined as a result of unmet expectations. Another student characterized his teacher as “nice” and considered her a smart teacher, but he still failed the class. Glasser (1986) asserted that the teaching methods employed by teachers have little significance when the need for belonging is not satisfied at first.

The failure on the part of the teacher to address the participants’ need for belonging was evident in the classes that some of the participants failed in ninth grade and other grades. None of the participants accused their teachers of not knowing their subject matter, but they did report that they did not have relationships with the teachers of those classes. Surely, other factors besides the lack of a caring relationship may have contributed to failure but a stronger teacher relationship may have helped them overcome other obstacles.

Glasser (1986) also argues that this need to belong is met primarily by a positive relationship with the teacher. The participants in the study did not appear to understand the correlation between their relationships with their teachers and their classroom experience; however, there was a decline in student learning, engagement, and performance when relationship with their teacher did not generate a sense of belonging within the student. Goodenow (1993) found that children believed in the value of their work, had higher expectations of their own success, and were motivated when they felt they belonged. The participants’ need for belonging seem to be unmet in most classrooms due to a lack of positive relationships with particular teachers. The participants did not report this as a negative experience; rather, they discussed it as if it
were to be expected. Even when participants failed a class, they blamed themselves and not the teacher, as if the complete burden of student learning rested on their shoulders.

Some researchers offer explanations for the achievement gap that exist for African American males. For instance, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) argue that African American youth develop oppositional identities regarding academics when academic achievement is viewed as the domain of Whites; however, this was not evident in the current study. Contrary to Ogbu (1986), the participants did not express any negative views regarding academic achievement nor did they view academic achievement as a “White” domain. Therefore, the theory of developing oppositional identities does not apply to the participants in this current study; their perspectives of academic achievement were neither influenced nor related to oppositional identity.

**The Athlete and Non-Athlete Divide**

There were social and academic benefits to being an athlete. Brown & Evans (2002) states students who are involved in school activities have higher levels of school connection and membership. This was evident in the current study in that the athletes experienced a larger social network that included peers and additional staff members, such as AVID teachers, coaches, and mentors. The participants who were in AVID were also athletes. Additional programs, such as AVID, provided opportunities for athletes, in this study to have formal and informal interactions with adult staff members. For example, the AVID program provided college field trips; these trips enabled the participants to socialize with adults in a less formal setting. In addition, personal tours and college contacts exposed the students to the potential reality of going to college.
Participants experienced the social benefits of being popular with their peers as well as having access to adults on campus for additional relational and academic support.

The popularity and status of being an athlete even earned them the privilege of a designated “space” on campus. Not only do they consider the space as their own, but others also refer to the space as the “football bench”. All of the participants identified a place where they hung out during break and lunch. However, the non-athletes mentioned two or three friends in their hang out space; whereas, the athletes mentioned the football bench, which was a popular location with a large group of more athletes and other visitors. Not only did the athletes hang out there, but also it was popular for other students to be associated with this area because of the status attached to the football bench.

According to the athletes, there was an administrator very near the football bench during break and lunch and there was a positive relationship between the group and the administrator. The motive or purpose of the administrative presence was unknown to the students. The consistent presence of the administrator suggests there may have been other elements unknown to the athletes that warranted this assignment. None of the athletes had a discipline file, while two of the three non-athletes had several incidents that resulted in referrals. This is another example of the different school experiences between the student athletes and non-athletes. Interestingly, the same two participants with the lowest state test scores were also the non-athletes who had the lowest grade point averages. Moreover, their only connections to school were their friends.

Three of the nine students in the study had an adult on campus that they would talk to if they had a problem. None of the adults were teachers. One of the adults on
campus was a counselor (identified by an athlete), the other was a security guard (identified by a non-athlete) and the last was a football buddy, an adult who volunteered to be teamed with a football player for mentoring purposes. The athletes in the study referred to the counselor as the Sports Counselor, although this was not her official title. Nevertheless, she was known for assisting the athletes with school related issues. Both athletes (Matthew and David) identified an adult on campus that they developed relationships with through sports; the non-athlete mentioned the security guard, a relationship that began with discipline issues but developed over time.

Extra Supports for Athletes

In addition to the privilege of having a designated space of their own, the athletes were assigned staff mentors who served as additional support. Matthew mentioned that knowing that his mentor, a football buddy, was on campus was helpful. Although the football buddy was not a teacher, she was African American, and the athlete credited her with giving him wise advice and giving him pats on the back. Matthew perceived her as the “grandma type”. She was someone he trusted, and she always made him “feel better” after they talked.

The academic benefits to being an athlete included the AVID class that equipped students with college information along with personalized college preparation. This class also offered specific guidance in the area of a-g courses, placement in these courses as well as advanced placement courses, study skills training, homework assistance by peers and college students who served as tutors, assistance with college applications and parent education nights, which included financial aid information. According to the athletes, they were enrolled in the program by a coach and counselor once they made a team. The
additional information, guidance, and encouragement, given to athletes, through AVID provided academic and other advantages that the non-athletes in this study did not have.

The advantages of this additional information between the two groups became apparent when it came to their aspirations. All of the athletes expressed intentions to go to a university after high school. In contrast, only one of the three non-athletes mentioned wanting to go to Temple Community College, while the other two just wanted to get out of high school. While Spence (2000) contends that African American males focus more attention on sports at the expense of intellectual pursuits, Jordan (1999) argues that participation in sports help African American students become more engaged. Contrary to Spence (2000), the sports program served as an academic support for the participants in this study. The athletes had academic goals and aspirations that developed over time and the sports program assisted them in developing these ambitions. Similar to Jordan (1999), some of the participants mentioned that at some point, the sport-mandated grade checks were their only motivation to perform well academically. This study is not suggesting that participation in athletics is the answer to addressing this significant achievement gap experienced by African American high school males; however, participation in athletics, along with built-in academic supports, appeared to provide the athlete participants with the personal guidance they needed to navigate high school and prepare for college or university attendance.

Race and Curriculum

Acting White

Although acting White is a common theme discussed in literature that involves African American students and academic achievement, the participants in this current
study did not have much to say about it. All of the participants admitted to hearing the term, but none reported using it, and some did not have much experience with the term at all. Previous research has suggested that African American students associate academic achievement with a Eurocentric orientation (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). In other words, Black students equate academic achievement with acting White. However, Fordham and Ogbu’s 1986 study was challenged by Spencer, Noll, Stolzfus and Harpalani (2001), who found that when Black students used the term acting White, they were not referring to academic achievement, so much as they were referring to more social elements such as, music, clothing and activities that one may be distinctly involved in that is not typically identified as part of their racial or cultural norm.

The current study seems to suggest the student’s perceptions of acting White was relegated more toward social issues as discussed by Spencer et al. (2001) and was not necessarily equated with a Eurocentric academic environment. For example, when Silas defined his view of Acting White, he did not mention academics all but stated, “I think it’s when a Black person try to dress like a White person and listen to like White music.” David gave an example of Acting White when he stated, “it’s like a Black person trying to skateboard, everybody know we don’t skateboard.” There were no indications that participants in this present study viewed academic achievement solely in terms of acting White. As a matter of fact, this study’s findings suggests that the Black participants did not feel any overt pressure to act White, in the academic sense that was referred to by Fordham & Ogbu (1986). However, Carter (2005) research reveals that African American high school students’ resistance to “Acting White” is in part defined through their clothing, language, music, and the disposition that students use as racial markers
that identifies them as to who they are and protects their racial identity from the mainstream cultural identity. More importantly, Carter (2005) points out that African American students’ resistance to “Acting White” not only has a racially defined social component, but it also is underpinned by the students’ racial identity. For instance, Carter (2005) found that most African American high school students are willing to achieve academically, though they are not willing to erase their racial identity at the expense of achieving academically.

**Lack of Cultural Representation Within Curriculum**

When asked about the representation of culture in the curriculum, all of the participants voiced a desire to learn about their culture in school. Seven of the nine participants stated that they neither had a conversation about a positive contribution made by someone of their same race nor had an assignment regarding their race. When asked if they had ever read a book about their race, Matthew responded, “[I] never have assignments about my race. Like my teachers in all my years of school have never assigned me a book about my race, I’ve read some on my own, but it’s never in the school curriculum.” In response to the same question, Silas added,

I think that like if we had a class or Black people were in books for good stuff, it would make us take more pride in our culture, and yeah we could be in class smiling for a change when people talk about Black people.

Similarly, Mark stated, “I think if we had a class about our culture, I honestly think like that would make us appreciate our race more and do better.” John was a little more neutral or unaffected, “it’s been like this forever, I’m use to it.” When asked how to describe how they would feel about more Black males attending Temple High, all of the
participants expressed a desire for more presence of Black males and teachers so that they would feel more comfortable at school. Two of the participants stated that Black teachers “understood” them in a way that other teachers did not and that having more Black males would provide more opportunities to share cultural commonalities. The participants also mentioned the social isolation that they experienced due to a lack of other Black students in the class. David stated that in many of his classes, he is the only Black student and even after three years in the same school, sometimes he is still “lonely.” Samuel claimed that having more Black males would help them feel “more like a unit.” Their comments suggests that there is a genuine struggle taking place at this institution to embrace, develop and celebrate African American cultural identities and that only a few teachers have been able to assist them in this area. Of course, site administration oftentimes cannot control the racial diversity of staff and student enrollment, but culturally relevant curriculum can be implemented if effective professional development is provided.

It is important to note that the participants, as Black students, expressed a desire to take African American courses and to see more of their own cultural history in their classes. Researchers state that people of color would be less invisible in academia if schools’ curriculum were infused with contributions of people of color and that this infusion would assist African American males in finding their place in education by countering negative stereotypes (Majors and Billson, 1992; Steele, 1997). Ladson-Billings (2009) argues that when the dominant culture continues to adopt textbooks or curriculum that distorts or omits one’s history, culture or background, the only way to counter the negative affects is for schools to embed that culture within the curriculum. Ladson-Billings (2009) refers to this as culturally relevant curriculum and points out that
it can validate students’ culture. The students in the present study expressed feeling invisible as a result of the lack of presence of their culture and race in the curriculum. 

Lynch (2006) states that in order to ensure that all children receive a quality education, the experiences of all races should be included in the schools’ curriculum. 

Timothy described a disadvantage to the lack of his culture in the curriculum by stating, “We need to see good things our people did and made, but yeah White people need to know too and if it ain’t in school books how they gone know?” It is important for African American students, particularly males, to have a deep awareness of past and current struggles for educational access and opportunities; this kind of awareness has historically promoted a strong value for learning and education in the African American community (Perry, 1993; Spencer, Noll, Stolzfus & Harpalani, 2001; Weinberg, 1977).

Within the context of this study, the participants were at a disadvantage, since it appears that the African American community in the catchment area of Temple School District is small and scattered. Nevertheless, schools can address the need of African American males by incorporating culturally relevant curriculum in the school with carefully planned professional development program that focus on teacher action research and offers appropriate teacher support. The professional development program should explain why and demonstrate how to implement a culturally relevant curriculum as well as reap its benefits for the students.

**Implications for Policy and Practice**

The findings of this research study indicate a need for a series of professional development experiences with teachers in the area of relationship building. The professional development plan would need to include strategies for implementation, with
effective teacher coaching to improve teacher-student relationships with African American male students. Opposition and resistance to the above noted idea of teacher caring and culturally relevant teaching should be expected and resources should be put in place to offer assistance to teachers. This professional development program can positively contribute to the overall educational experience of African American males by increasing their sense of school belonging, academic engagement, academic performance, academic achievement, and personal development.

Another implication involves professional development in cultural relevancy, which may include developing the characteristics of culturally relevant teachers, as well as understanding the benefit of cultural relevant teaching, and culturally relevant curriculum. Educators should have healthy conversations about effective strategies that build academic confidence in African American males and about the impact that a curriculum that displays positive contributions from other African Americans along with their rich heritage of struggle for education has on African American male students (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nodding, 2005; Perry & Delpit, 1998).

Delpit (1995), Irvine (1990) and Ladson-Billings (1994) also challenges Jordan (2000) by arguing that the race of students and the cultural background of teachers play a significant role in the education of Black students. Therefore, recognizing that race and the cultural relevancy of the teacher, influences teaching and learning is critical to the academic success of African American male students. Teachers should be given the information and resources to address this critical fact through professional development. It is important that the professional development is framed as a reform of the system instead of the deficit model that seeks to reform the students (Swanson et al., 2003). This
information should bring awareness to the powerful influence of teacher-student relationships as well as the connection between this relationship and academic engagement and performance (Anderman, 2002; Cornell & Wellborn, 1994; Fine, 1991).

The findings of this study suggest that there is a need for schools to provide additional academic supports for non-athletes. The non-athletes did not report having positive relationships with other adults on campus, except for their relationships with their favorite teachers. Also they were less knowledgeable about the requirements for university attendance, were tracked into lower level courses, were not enrolled in any other school programs or clubs, and expressed less ambitions future aspirations. Conversely, the athletes in this study seemed to benefit from what Steele (1991) calls a triangulation of influences, that is those who contributed to the development and building of the athletes’ self-efficacy skills, those who held high expectations of the students, and those who were the students’ advocates.

**Limitation of the Study**

Although Temple High School had the highest enrollment for African American students in Temple School District, the total number of African American males in grades 11 and 12 equaled 29. Once the students who were in special education, home-hospital and independent study were excluded, the total number of eligible students was 17. Therefore, the population of potential participants was decreased substantially. The study focused on only one suburban high school; therefore, results cannot be generalized for all high schools in this district. Schools with similar demographics, however, may make comparisons to the present study. This study was also limited to nine African American males and more than half (six out of nine) were athletes, which created a sub-category
within the demographic group. The current study did not provide follow-up interviews for clarification or further probing. Teachers and other support staff were not interviewed.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Future studies might duplicate the approach of this study but increase the sample size of African American high school males (athletes and non-athletes) selected from a variety of high school settings. It may also help to add interviews with staff, such as teachers, coaches, AVID teachers, and staff mentors who serve as support for these students, for the purposes of identifying the motivation behind and/or the personal philosophies that informed their supportive roles of the African American male students in this study. An increase in sample size would enable future researchers to determine if other extracurricular activities assist African American high school males in the same academically productive manner that sports did in this particular study.

Further studies could duplicate this study with a larger sample and include the perceptions of professional training, philosophy of teaching, and guiding principles of the teachers where no relationship with the participants existed. A larger sample would also help researchers make comparisons between the teacher who did not develop caring relationships with participants and the favorite teachers who did. The data could also help to identify specific needs for pre-service teachers and professional development for post service teachers and administrators.

It may also be worthwhile to try to determine whether sports and teacher-student relationships have a similar impact on African American female students’ school
belonging experiences and academic engagement. This study did not focus on African American females and the lack of current research warrants further investigation.

Lastly, in line with the recommendations for staff professional development, researchers may want to investigate best practices for implementing culturally relevant professional development programs in high schools, particularly with a focus on African American males.

**Concluding Statement**

This qualitative research study intended to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions of school belonging from the perspective of African American high school males. Findings from this study suggest that the student participants who were athletes experienced social and academic benefits that non-athlete student participants did not experience. Brown and Evans (202) found that students who are involved in school activities have higher levels of school connection and membership. This was evident in the current study. Another finding of the study suggests that when there is a caring teacher who is capable of facilitating student learning and initiates a relationship with an African American male student, the student reciprocates with becoming more academically engaged and his academic performance improves. This finding is consistent with other studies (Nodding, 2005; Ladson-Billings 1994; Perry & Delpit, 1998).

Focusing on the influential nature of the teacher-student relationship, the interactions between teachers and students, and the powerful implications of these interactions on student achievement can serve as a valuable source of professional development knowledge for educators. It is imperative that teachers, who are entrusted
with the goal of educating all students are informed and coached to understand the influential nature of caring, teacher student relationships. Moreover, the relevance of race and learning needs to be critical to teaching African American students in today’s schools. If not, Black male students will continue to be forced to find a way to “beat the odds” in order to experience academic success.

Within the current study, there were commonalities that surfaced among all of the participants. For example, all of the participants had a goal of graduating from high school and had a personal knowledge of the potential consequences of not furthering their education. Some of the consequences included limitations on the quality of life, unemployment, low-paying jobs and a diminished sense of self worth. Some of these students drew these types of consequences from personal examples and lessons passed down from people they knew, while others seemed to be more aware of the broader social context of the experiences of many Black males within their community and society in general. Several students stated that the above consequences coupled with caring relationships with peers and adults were motivating enough for them to attend and complete high school and avoid becoming a dropout statistics. While the consequences noted could be attributed to any group of students who do not take their academic pursuits seriously, the students included in this study internalized these consequences as ones that were more characteristic outcomes for Black students, especially males.

The outcomes of the interviews with these students seem to highlight a number of considerations for furthering teachers’ practice related to African American students. The first of the considerations that emerged through the interviews in this study was that all of the students in the study seemed to do better when they perceived themselves as being
engaged by their teachers. In each case, it was not simply that the students were completing work within the classrooms; rather, it appeared that their teachers purposely encouraged and sometimes even prodded the students into becoming involved in their own education. Students who were doing the best academically in the study were also those students who reported having a close, caring relationships with their teachers and being engaged by them. This finding has interesting research possibilities in examining patterns of interaction between students and those teachers who were included in the study by the students to be caring and engaging. This may yield more information about what types of teacher interaction patterns are most likely to be interpreted found by Black students as engaging. However, the recurrent theme that stood out as reported by the participants’ was the interpersonal relationship building skills of the teachers that seemed to specifically reach out to the Black males in the study.

The next consideration was arguably the most important finding of the interviews conducted as part of this study. This consideration was the need to prepare teachers to be more than simply culturally aware, the results seem to indicate that teachers who are culturally proficient seem to be those who Black male students become attached to and work for. While the majority of the teachers in this study were also Black, Mrs. McKarrel was not. She was described as relating to the students in a similar manner and taking a similar interest in the students, as did the teachers who were Black. The awareness that this non-Black teacher had regarding the recognition of students’ needs was consistent with actions demonstrating cultural relevancy. Whether or not the teacher was specifically trained in cultural relevancy was not known; however, the culturally relevant
actions of this teacher indicate that teachers do not have to share the same racial background as their students in order to be effective.

The participants in this study responded to a particular type of teacher and teaching style, not because the students had deficits that could not be addressed by other teachers, but the student participants perceived that the favorite teachers cared about them. This perception of care served as motivation and encouragement to engage in the classroom and the overall process of learning. The interview data from this study seems to suggest that teaching students regardless of race, by using a mainstream curriculum, is a strategy that fails to capitalize on the opportunity to create an environment where race is specifically included in the classroom and considered as an important part of understanding students for instructional purposes.

The students within the study expressed that they felt like the quality of their education depended on the teacher to whom they were assigned. While they seemed to take responsibility for their part in the educational process, admitting sometimes to “mess” around in class or not complete all assignments, the student participants also expressed that they were willing to do more for those teachers who seemed to reach out to them. This included more than reaching out academically, as the teacher behaviors described by the students seemed to be characteristic of caring about the students as individuals, as well as students. In the absence of a caring relationship, the curriculum in the classroom seemed to be inaccessible to the students across their school experience.

When students within the current study felt engaged, culturally recognized and cared for, they ultimately expressed that they felt they belonged in the academic environment where access to learning was initiated by caring and supportive teachers. This sort of
teacher driven intentional caring through teaching that leads to belonging is what educators should seek to achieve when we educate African American males.
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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

**Research Question:** How do African American male students experience and perceive their sense of school belonging in a suburban high school? How does the sense of belonging among African American males influence their academic engagement?

Warm up: What is your favorite thing to do at school?

Probes: Who is involved? How often?

What do you want to do after high school?

**Teacher – Student Relationship**

1. Do you have a favorite teacher? Why or why not?
2. How did you feel about “learning” in this class?
3. What did the teacher do to influence your desire to learn?
4. Are your teachers caring?
5. As far as teaching, what was going on in this teachers’ classroom?
6. What teaching styles did this person use (groups, lectures, projects, visuals, etc)?
7. When do your teachers spend individual time with you? Is there a specific time for this?
8. What grade did you receive in this class? Why? How did you do on tests? Why?
9. Teacher Perception
   a) How would most of your teachers describe you?
b) Is it accurate?

c) How would you describe the relationships you have with most of your teachers?

d) Describe your favorite class.

10. What grade did you receive?

11. Have you ever failed a class? Explain

**School Culture**

1. How would you describe this school?

2. How connected do you feel to this school?
   
   a) Probe: How would you describe the learning environment for African American male students here?

   b) How would you describe the relationship between African American male students and teachers in your high school?

3. How would you describe your friends?

4. How many of them do you interact with outside of school?
   
   a) How often are you with them during school?

   b) Do you have a certain place on campus where you spend a lot of time?

   c) Who is with you?

   d) How many of them share your ethnicity? (also African American)

   e) How many of them are male?

5. If there were more Black male students here, would this school change?
   
   a) How so?

   b) How would you feel about the change?
c) Would your experience change at all?

6. How would you describe your teachers?
   a) How often do you have assignments or read books about your race? What do you think about it? How does it feel?
   b) Do any of your teachers share your ethnicity? (also African American) What do you think about this?
   c) How many are male? What do you think about this?
   d) What do you know about Honors and AP classes?
   e) Have you ever been approached about taking an honors or advance placement class?

7. When you are having a problem, who is the adult on campus you talk to?

8. Do you have conversations in class about positive contributions made to society by African Americans? How does it affect you?

Achievement

1. If I observed you in your favorite class, what would I see?
   a) If I observed you in your least favorite class what would I see?
   b) What’s the difference in the two classes?
   c) What do you know about your standardized test scores?
   d) What do they reflect?
   e) What do you know about your grade point average?
   f) What do you know about the requirements for you to graduate?
   g) Who talks to you about this? When? How often?
2. Do you believe that your grades and test scores were good measures of your academic ability? Why?
   a) How do you feel about them?
   b) What do your parents say about them?
   c) What do your teachers say about them?
   d) Do you discuss grades with your friends? Are their grades important to you?
   e) Have you ever considered dropping out of school? If so, why?
   f) Do your friends talk about college? What do they say?
   g) Do you think being African American male affects your school performance?
   h) Are there African American males here that are considered “smart”? or make really good grades? What do other African Americans say or think about them?
   i) Have you ever heard or used the term “Acting White”? What does that mean to you?
   j) What are some of the differences for African American males with a college degree and those without?

**Classroom Engagement**

1. How many days per week do you complete homework?

2. Do you ask questions in class? Why or why not?

3. Do you answer questions in class?
**Belonging Addressed**

1. 14. Do you think there are barriers (things that prevent) that interfere with African American males feeling like they belong in this high school?

2. 18. If you could start an area of school all over, what grade would you select?
   a) Why?

3. 19. If you could have a conversation with teachers of African American male students, what would you share with them?

4. 20. If you were a teacher, list two things you would do with/for African American males.

5. 21. If you were the principal, how would you interact with African American male students?

**Reflections**

1. Do you think there are advantages of going to college? List them.

2. Do you think you are doing things to prepare yourself for college? What?

3. If you could change one thing about this school what would it be?
Appendix B

Invitational Flyer

PARTICIPANTS WANTED

African American male seniors needed for a study on school experiences and academic engagement of African American males.

- Meet researcher
- Ask questions

PLAN TO ATTEND MEETING
IN MEDIA CENTER ON __________.
LUNCH PROVIDED

Please contact Ms. Temple at (888) 884-1244 or lasont1@aol.com for more information.
Appendix C

Consent Form

Consent to Participate in Research
African American Male Perceptions Student Form

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by LaSonja Temple (principal investigator) a graduate student at California State University, Northridge. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are (1) African American, (2) male and (3) are willing to share your experiences. Your participation in this research study is voluntary.

Purpose of the Study

I am interested in examining the perceptions of high school African American males in regards to their feelings of school belonging and how this influences their academic engagement. The goal of the study is to better understand the needs of this particular group in an effort to create or enhance specific programs that will improve academic engagement.

Procedures

If you decide to participate in this study, you may be asked to do the following:
1. Participate in a 30 minute interview session regarding school experiences and academic performance;
2. Complete a survey regarding school experiences (15 -20 minutes); and or

Payment to Subjects for Participation

Interviewees and/or research subjects will not be paid for their participation in this study.

Confidentiality

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Every effort will be taken to ensure your confidentiality as a participant in this study. If you consent to participate, you will be assigned a number to protect you. No identifying information will be used. With your permission, the interviews will be audio taped and transcribed. You may decline to be recorded and have the recorder turned off at any time during the interview. Prior to the finalization of the study, you have the option of reviewing and editing your comments that are in the report. Audio tapes will be destroyed after transcription; transcriptions will be maintained for a period of one year after they have been transcribed.
Participation and Withdrawal

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may skip any question that you do not want to answer for any reason. You may ask that the audiotape be stopped at any time and/or may leave the interview at any time for any reason without consequences of any kind. You have up to five days after the interview to withdraw from the study.

Right to Know
My dissertation chair along with two other doctoral instructors will have access to transcribed interviews.

Identification of Investigator

If you have any questions, concerns, or comments about this research and your participation in this study, you may contact the following:

1. LaSonja Temple (Principal Investigator) via email at lasonja.temple@venturausd.org or (805) 289-0023.

2. William DelaTorre (Dissertation Chair) via email at wdelatorre@csun.edu or (818) 677-7895.
Signature of Research Subjects

I have read and understand the procedures described in this “Consent to Participate in Research.” My questions have all been answered and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

________________________________________
Name of Subject

________________________________________
Signature of Subject                      Date

In my judgment, the research subject is voluntarily and knowingly giving informed consent and possesses the legal capacity to give informed consent to participate in this study.

________________________________________
Name of Principal Investigator

________________________________________
Signature of Principal Investigator        Date
How do African American experience and perceive their sense of school belonging in a suburban high school? How does their perception influence their academic engagement?

Parental Informed Consent Form

Introduction
Your son is being asked to participate in a research study conducted by LaSonja Temple (Principal Investigator), from the College of Education at California State University, Northridge (CSUN). He was selected as a possible participant in this study because he is African American, male, and a senior in high school who is willing to share his experiences and perceptions of school belonging. **His participation in this research study is voluntary.**

Purpose of the Study
This study explores African American males perceptions of school belonging. The expectation is that through a better understanding of how African American males view their sense of belonging/connection to school, educators will gain insight into how schools can strengthen the sense of school belonging. This study may also contribute by providing strategies that will assist with modifying current practices and policies to adequately meet the needs of African American male students.

Procedures
If you elect to participate in this study, your son will be asked to do the following:

1. Participate in a 60-90 minute interview session;

Potential Risks and Discomforts to Participant
The potential risk is that students may feel uncomfortable answering questions regarding race and/or discussing issues regarding race and racial experiences. Researcher will remind students that they are free to skip any question (s) that makes them feel uncomfortable and that they can end the interview at any point without consequences. In addition, no names will be used; you, your son, the school, and the staff will remain anonymous. **Your son may elect not to answer any of the questions with which he feel uneasy and still remain as a participant in the study.**

Potential Benefits to Participant
Many participants in this type of study may find it helpful to reflect on their school experience and have an opportunity to provide a valuable perspective for educators to consider. Your sons’ involvement will add to the educational knowledge base and could potentially be used by educators to develop and/or strengthen policies and practices that will increase the level of school belonging experienced by African American males in high school. Additionally, there is an opportunity to improve the academic engagement of these students thereby improving their educational experiences.
Payment to Subjects for Participation
Interviewees and/or research subjects will not be paid for their participation in this study.

Confidentiality
Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you or your family will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. The data will be stored in my computer in my office and on a digital recorder; both will be secured with lock and key and researcher is the only person with a key. All participants will be supplied with a copy of the Experimental Subjects Bill of Rights. Students will receive no form of compensation for their participation and will be reminded that the study is not connected with the school and there are no school consequences or rewards given for their participation. After completion of the study, the identifiable data files and all data will be destroyed. Real names will not be used in the reporting or findings. Every effort will be taken to ensure your confidentiality as a participant in this study and your school will not be identified by name.

During the course of the project, your son may be audio taped. Your initials here ______ signify your consent to allow your child to be audio taped. Audio taping gives the researcher an opportunity to later create a written copy of the interview. With your permission, the interviews will be audio taped and transcribed. You may decline to have your son recorded and your son may have the recorder turned off at any time during the interview. Prior to the finalization of the study, you have the option of reviewing and editing your comments as included in the report. Audiotapes will be retained for one year and then erased.

Participation and Withdrawal
Your sons’ participation in this study is voluntary. He is not obligated to answer or respond to any question. He can skip any question, or any part of any question, and will not face any penalty for answering, or not answering, any question in any way. He may ask that the audiotape be stopped at any time and/or may leave the interview at any time for any reason without consequences of any kind.

Concerns
If you wish to voice a concern about the research, you may direct your question(s) to Research and Sponsored Projects, 18111 Nordhoff Street, California State University, Northridge, Northridge, CA 91330-8232, and by phone at 818-677-2901. If you have specific questions about the study you may contact Dr. William DelaTorre, dissertation chair, 18111 Nordhoff Street, Northridge, CA 91330-8265 and by phone at 818-677-2591 or via email at wdelatorre@csun.edu.

Identification of Investigator
If you have any questions about this research and your participation in this study, you may contact the following:
LaSonja Temple (Principal Investigator) via email at lasonja.temple@venturausd.org or (805) 289-0023.

Rights of Research Participants
You may withdraw consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You can stop your participation in the study at any time. You are not waiving legal claims, rights, or remedies because of your participation in this research study.

Signature of Research Participants
I have read and understand the procedures described in this “Consent to Participate in Research.” I have been provided with a copy of this consent form to keep and I give my informed consent for my child, named below, to participate in the study. My questions have all been answered to my satisfaction.

Child’s Name _________________________________________________________

Last First MI

Age ______

Parent/Legal Guardian Printed Name __________________________________________

Last First MI

Parent/Legal Guardian Signature ____________________________________________

Signature of Investigator or Designee
In my judgment the research subject is voluntarily and knowingly giving informed consent and possesses the legal capacity to give informed consent to participate in this research study.

Principal Investigator Signature _______________________________ Date ______

If you have signed this form, please return one copy in an envelope by mail to:
Dr. William Delatorre
Department of Education & Leadership Policy Studies
18111 Nordhoff Street
Northridge, CA 91330-8265

Or give form to LaSonja Temple.